

## LETTERS TO MY LATE WIFE

Ian Stewart

### Part One

#### Chapter One

He continued to stare at the computer screen while his hand moved from the keyboard to the ringing telephone, rolling around in his mind the sentence he had written to test its suitability. After a moment he shook his head, rejecting it like a wine he had tasted and found unsatisfactory.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Jonno, d’ja hear about the Sydney ad agency guy arrested in Singapore for bugging an underage boy? Good story for us. Drop anything you’re doing in Kuala Lumpur and get yourself off to Singapore as soon as possible.”

“I’m writing this piece I told you about yesterday on the political situation here - an analysis of the Malaysian landscape following the stoush between Mahathir and Anwar and how it’s given a boost to the opposition. You can use AFP for the Singapore story. I want to talk to a few more people before I wrap it up.”

“I’ve changed my mind on the political story. The young master wants a breezier more readable paper. That means less politics from South-East Asia, which, he says, no one reads. More people stories. An Aussie poofter on a pedophile charge is just the ticket.”

Here we go again, he thought angrily. They wanted him to be an ambulance chaser. That’s what he was doing 40 years ago as a young reporter in Sydney. It wasn’t the job of a foreign correspondent. Newspapers subscribed to international wire services to be alerted to breaking news and be provided with basic crime and disaster stories from abroad. Their representatives in the field were normally expected to concentrate on covering politics and major business developments in the countries where they resided and regional affairs of interest to readers. They followed up items carried by the agencies only if they were major catastrophes, had a special significance for Australia or needed to be given greater depth.

Scott almost delivered a blast down the telephone line. He had spent most of the previous day and all morning until the telephone call writing the story the foreign editor had promised to use. But he had reached a stage in his life when he was no longer prepared to get into an unwinnable argument. It just caused him the kind of stress that made his stomach ache. He would tell himself, in such circumstances, that he could always pack up and go home, although, so far, he had rejected that option because he was not sure that he was ready yet to return to his house in Sydney with its memories of tragedy and terrible loss. In the current case, he had little room for argument, any way. He had to concede that it had an Australian angle and even foreign correspondents were expected to turn their hands to the occasional “hometown” story.

I'm getting too old for this game, he reflected. Maybe one more year. He was tired of galloping around Asia after stories. These days he preferred the analytical piece, which he could develop through research and discussion with Malaysians, Singaporeans and Indonesians interested in their countries' politics and social problems, backed up by his own 30 plus years of experience reporting on the region. But as newspapers found themselves losing readers to television and the Internet they were turning to lighter and brighter articles. As a result, many of their regional reports, more usually through negligence than deliberate intent, belittled the people of developing nations by focusing on quirky aspects of their culture or traditions and ignoring their aspirations and attempts to secure a better life for themselves and their children. Today's publishers did not want a boring analysis of infighting within the United Malays National Organisation or an assessment of the achievements and failures of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. John Scott's specialty writing on South-East Asian was too esoteric for his present employer.

"Hang on," the foreign editor said. Scott could hear another voice in the background. "It's not just any old ad man, it's the creative director of one of the biggest agencies in Australia. That's even better."

Scott felt a small stab of pain in his chest, signalling a surge of acid in his gut. His throat was dry and he struggled to speak.

"Do you have any details? The man's name? And the agency?" he asked.

"Umm, just a minute. The agency's Bennelong. And the guy's name is Tan. James Tan. Sounds more Chinese than Australian. Anyway, I hope you can give me a story that will make the young master happy."

Scott wanted to say he was unable to cover the story but could not find the words to explain his reason. The foreign editor took his silence for assent and hung up. There was never any pleasant chit-chat between them. Their relationship was at best business-like. Michael Cox was 33 and he and most of his subs held the view their man in Kuala Lumpur was long past his use-by date. Scott survived only because the editor, an old friend, had given him the job. But now that the owner's 29-year-old son was reshaping the newspaper, he knew he should be giving serious consideration to jumping ship before he was cast adrift.

However, Scott's mind was not now on his job but on the information passed on to him by Cox. He had long feared that something like this would occur. Eighteen months had passed since his relations with his children had ruptured as a result of his furious reaction to learning the background to his son's marriage break-up, which had been kept secret from him at first. He had not heard from his son or daughter and had not tried to communicate with them in the wake of the family crisis. But his thoughts had turned often to his son and he had worried about all the possible consequences of the decision he had taken.

He did not want to go to Singapore. Cox would have to find someone else to cover the story if Scott revealed his personal interest in it but he was not sure that he wanted to do that. At the same time, his mind wrestled with the question of whether he had a moral obligation to go. He was still battling his conscience when the telephone rang again.

“Dad, James is in trouble.” He was always transported back in time when he heard Catherine’s voice. It was almost exactly like her mother’s. He could see his daughter in his mind as she spoke, one hand brushing back her long, black hair as the other held the receiver to her left ear. The oriental eyes she had inherited from his wife would be gazing intently ahead as she sat at the table on which the telephone rested in her London home.

“I heard.”

“He needs your help. You know Singapore. You have to go there and find him a good lawyer.”

“Did he ask for my help?”

“No. But you can’t just let him be buried by the Singapore justice system. He’s not guilty but no one believes him.”

“How do you know he’s not guilty?”

“Good God, Dad. We’re talking about James. Of course, he’s not guilty. He told me and I believe him.”

“How did you manage to talk to him?”

“He was allowed one overseas call and he called me. Dad, you’ve got to help him.”

“He didn’t ask for my help.”

“You know he wouldn’t.”

“I’ll speak to the best criminal barrister in Singapore.” He paused. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“How are my London grand-daughters?”

“They’re fine.”

“It’s been nearly two years since I’ve seen any pictures of them.”

“I’ll send you copies of the photographs we took last week. Please do what you can for James. Apart from the horror of being arrested for a crime he didn’t commit, he must be worried sick about his daughter.”

“Which daughter? Linda or Sarah? What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t Erika tell you? Sarah is seriously ill.”

“Oh, my God.”

“You have to help James.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

When the line went silent he put down the receiver, yearning for the time before his wife’s death when his life had seemed so satisfying and uncomplicated. It was hard for him to imagine now the contentment he had felt back then, when depression was merely a temporary gloominess on a bad day. Her passing had filled his mind with a black despair. Nevertheless, after burying himself in work, he had been slowly coming to terms with the tragic loss of the woman he had been married to for more than 30 years. Then, out of the blue, his son had delivered a new emotional blow, leaving him despondent and drained of all energy. A glance at the 2001 calendar on his desk reminded him that a year and a half had passed since those weeks in 1998 when it had gradually dawned upon him that he had been mistaken in thinking he knew everything there was to know about his son.

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## Chapter Two

Tape-recorded and transcribed August 4, 1998:

M. At this session, let’s go back a little in time. You didn’t confide in anybody about your sexual feelings?

J. No. It was my little secret. I had this idea of myself as an actor, playing the role my family wanted me to play.

M. When did you first begin to sense there was something sexually different about you compared with the way you were expected to feel by the people around you - particularly your family?

J. I must have been 11. We were living in Hong Kong, where my father was based as a foreign correspondent for The Washington Post. There was this 18-year-old American, Carl, who lived with his family in the same apartment block. He said hello to my sister and me one day when we met in the lift and then used to come downstairs and watch us when we were riding our bikes on the ground floor level. My sister took an instant dislike to Carl and told me to stay away from him but I was attracted to the American teenager. One day when I was on my own he invited me to his apartment. His parents were out and he took me into his bedroom. When he touched me I didn’t resist him. As far as I can recall that was my first sexual experience. I suppose you could say I was sexually abused by an older youth but it did not cause me any unhappiness. I certainly don’t have any memories of distress. I just remember wanting to go back to his apartment. And I went back there several times until he returned to the US with his parents. The only thing that bothered me was that his dog was always there. He seemed to like the idea of the dog being an observer of our sexual activity. That was the only strangeness about the whole thing. Otherwise, it was something I

wanted to continue.

M. Do you believe this encounter was a significant factor in your sexual development?

J. I went through a stage, when I was a teenager, wondering whether I would have been straight if I hadn't met Carl and had sex with him. But I can't say today I didn't enjoy it so I think it would have happened some time if it hadn't happened then.

M. Was Carl the first person you were strongly attracted to?

J. Actually, no. There was this girl, Polly, who was in the same class as me at Glenealy Junior School, in Hong Kong. I was only 5 or 6 but I remember being attracted to her - not in a sexual sense but a falling-in-love kind of way. I have this recollection of standing on the balcony of our apartment and wanting to be with her. I used to think about her a lot. And the recollection of that made me question later whether I was heterosexual from the day I was born until I met Carl. But it was really only boys for whom I felt a sexual attraction.

M. After Carl left Hong Kong did you try to find someone to take his place?

J. No. Funnily enough, after that there was no real sexual contact with anybody until I got married. I was strongly attracted to another man in Hong Kong but he was in love with a woman friend of my mother, so I never revealed my longing for him. He used to invite me to go sailing and I would try to find some excuse to watch him while he took a shower when we returned to his apartment.

By the time we moved to Sydney and I enrolled at Killara High School my mind was filled with sexual images. At school, I had constant fantasies about the other boys. Then I fell in love with a class-mate, Michael, and he was seldom far from my thoughts. Day and night. In fact, there were nights when I would go to his house and just hang around. As late as his parents would let me. I would wait there with the idea of seeing him getting ready to go to bed, undressing and putting on his pajamas. When I think of it now it was all pretty bizarre but at the time I was just driven to do it.

I went through this period when all I could think about was Michael. These sexual feelings were so powerful and very distracting. It affected my studies.

M. So for a long period, after that first experience at the age of 11 or 12, you had these increasingly strong feelings but never engaged in sexual intercourse.

M. That's right. All through my teen years I was obsessed with the question of sex. In the school changing room after sports, I would be looking at the other guys as they took their uniforms off and went to take a shower, while at the same time trying to act casual and disinterested. But even as I experienced a sensual pleasure I also felt this was something really bad and not an area I should be going into. Looking back now, I realise I had no role models and no concept of what gay was. It seemed that I was the only one interested in this side of life.

M. Did this cause you confusion?

J. Confusion? No, I don't remember that. I just remember thinking that this was my little secret and I needed to keep it that way. At the same time, there was this intense sexual desire which lasted through my entire high school years.

M. You didn't deny your feelings to yourself? You accepted them?

A. Well, they were there. It was a part of me which I knew I had to keep secret. Then, I got to the point where, as most young guys do, I started masturbating and the person in my mind when I did this was always a boy. That was my outlet. I never fantasised about having sex with girls.

M. In our previous session, you spoke of a girl you were interested in before you met your wife.

J. Yes. I've wondered about that a lot. We met in an advertising agency where I took a part-time job while going to uni. That's where I got the bug to make advertising my career. When I first joined the agency I fell desperately in love with a good-looking copywriter called Alan. I finally got up the nerve to start talking to him in a way that showed I liked him - and found out he had a girl friend. I switched right off. I remember thinking, "I've got to get a girl friend." And then Julie started with the agency. She was a pretty red-haired girl. We went out and had a lot of fun and we did a lot of dancing and stuff. I was strongly attracted to her and I had this sense that I was falling in love with her. But we never had sex.

M. So the relationship never progressed to a point where you considered marrying or living together.

J. No. And I've always had a degree of regret about that. There was definitely a strong bond between us. I experienced some kind of connection with this girl but whether it would have worked sexually or not I'll never know. A major stumbling block was her religion. All the members of her family and their friends were staunch Baptists and were opposed to her seeing anyone who did not hold their beliefs. At that time, I was playing for a basketball team that won the state championship and was invited to Honolulu for a series of games against the Hawaii champions. While I was away Julie met a guy who was a Baptist and approved by her family and that was the end of our relationship.

M. After Julie, were there any other woman who attracted your interest?

J. No. Not until I met my wife. Up until then I was only interested in men. Before I dropped out of uni to join an ad agency fulltime I spent the break between my first and second year working on a big cattle station in northern Queensland. I had always wanted to see the real outback and got the chance through a friend of my father, who was a part-owner. With all the men there, the same sensations I experienced among the boys at school came back, creating a lot of sexual tension within me.

M. Did it lead to any relationships?

J. At first, I just fantasised about one of the men who I considered good looking. I used to watch him in the shower, while pretending I wasn't interested. Then, later, there was another guy who I

sensed was becoming infatuated with me. We said things to each other that revealed our mutual sexual attraction but never did anything because we were both too frightened.

M. Then you quit university and joined a small ad agency in Melbourne.

J. Yes.

M. And it was there you met your future wife. How did that relationship begin and develop?

J. Erika had arrived in Australia from Germany with her parents and older sister Hannah five years earlier when her father, Paul Hoffman, was appointed head of Deutsche Bank's Australian operations, based in Melbourne. But three years after they had settled in Australia, he died suddenly from bowel cancer. Erika's mother, Gretchen, who had never liked Australia, decided to return to Germany but her daughters were set on staying in Australia. Hannah had become engaged to an Australian and Erika insisted she wanted to finish high school. She had perfected the English she learned in Germany very quickly and was one of her year's top scholars. Her mother reluctantly consented to her wishes and arranged for her to stay with a cousin of her father, who had emigrated to Australia in the seventies, and his family, who were living in Melbourne. It was through her foster family that she got a job in the ad agency that I joined. At the same time, she was doing a TAFE secretarial course.

She was very popular with all the guys in the agency but she was reserved, while always friendly, with everyone but me. I think she recognised we had in common the fact that we were both feeling a bit lonely. She had lost her father and was half a world away from her mother. I was experiencing the home-sickness of no longer living with my parents in Sydney. We enjoyed chatting together and gradually developed a close friendship. Most of the men in the agency had wives or girl friends. As always, I wanted to be like everybody else. I didn't want to be different. I thought it would be great if I could find a girl friend. And, of course, we are brought up to believe as children - the whole of our culture is based on this belief - that when we grow up, we find a girl, get married and have kids. That's the life you're expected to live. So I was very much into that and hadn't been exposed to any alternative lifestyle.

M. Although you were brought up that way, nevertheless, you were drawn to something quite different. Did this create a conflict within you at this time?

J. No. I presumed this contrary urge was some kind of a stage I was going through. I told myself it was not as important as getting married and having kids, having a "normal" life. It was like a hobby that I would eventually have to give up because it didn't fit in with the married thing - or a habit I would quit when the time was right. I've read and think it's true that on a certain level gay men and straight women have much in common. Erika and I got on very well. It was wonderful to find a real friend after being so long without having anyone I could relate to and be at ease with. We could talk about all sorts of stuff. It was an ideal relationship. But that was all before sex.

M. That was a problem?

J. Yes. As we became closer it seemed natural that Erika should move in with me. I think she

finally put our thoughts in words and I was happy that she did. Her mother wasn't very pleased with the idea when she heard about it from Paul's cousin but Erika convinced her that it would eventually lead to marriage. We had hugged and kissed when I had taken Erika out for dinner, movies and concerts and I assumed the sex thing would take its natural course when we were living together in my flat.

But getting started was very challenging for me because my only experience of any sexual act went back to that time in Hong Kong - and that was a distant pre-teen thing with an older male. I tried to rationalise my impotence by telling myself that it would be challenging for any young man who had never had sex with a girl to go through it for the first time.

M. That might be true for some inexperienced males. But in your case there was more to it, wasn't there.?

J. You're right, of course. I was evading the real issue - that I had been lusting after boys all through my teens. And they were the focus of all my sexual imaginings.

Anyway, Erika and I struggled with this problem. I became increasingly frustrated and upset and finally ended up in tears. I was beginning to see that my "hobby" might be the reason for my abject failure in the field of sexual intercourse. At the same time, Erika sensed it did not stem simply from a normal nervousness or timidity and asked me what was wrong. But I couldn't tell my secret to anyone, not even my lover. So I told her a previous girl-friend had made me anxious about sex by taunting me over my failure to get an erection. She expressed sympathy for me, said the girl had been horrible to treat me that way and assured me she would help me overcome my impotence. That meant, thankfully, that I was no longer under pressure, so I decided I had to practice this sexual thing and get it right.

M. However, you had nothing to guide you, having had no previous sexual experience with a girl - or even with a boy - in your teen years.

J. That's right. The only sex I ever had was in my head and it was always with boys or men. However, after a while, I was able to prime myself for sex with Erika. While it sounds artificial, there were great moments between us.

M. Okay, we'll leave it there for now. Talk to Jan about a next appointment that fits in with your work schedule.

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Chapter Three

September 14, 1998

My dearest Siu Mei,

I am writing this letter because I am troubled by what seems to be happening in Sydney. Strains have appeared between James and Erika and I am afraid their marriage may be foundering. Following your death, our son and daughter and their spouses provided crucial support and encouragement as I struggled with my grief, despair and depression. The strong ties forged then made me think that the family that was left to me would be bound together in love and harmony for the rest of my life. Now I am beginning to believe that I may have been mistaken.

In the years that have passed since your death, I have often talked to you - telling you how much I missed you and keeping you informed about the birth of grand-children and the delight their antics and progress was bringing me - but today I need to put my thoughts into words that I can see in front of me. In that way, I might be able to stop them from swirling around in my head and increasing my anxiety. At the same time, I can try to imagine what you might say if you were alive to reply to me. Despite the tensions that sometimes occurred in our marriage, we were always able to work our way through the small crises of our life by discussing them together. Our views were seldom far apart where the future of our children was in question but when they were different I always valued your opinion.

The world we once had seems so distant now. You and I considered ourselves blessed to have found each other and to have produced a handsome son and beautiful daughter. From the time of our first encounter in Jakarta through our marriage in Hong Kong, the birth of James and Catherine and the early years of living in the British Crown Colony, we revelled in the romance of our existence. Our diplomat friend Guy Mason was reminded of the Han Suyin story "Love Is a Many Splendoured Thing", whistling the theme from the movie as he gave us a key and directions to an Australian High Commission bungalow in the Puncak hill resort outside Jakarta, where we spent the rapturous weekend that sealed our passion for each other.

I repeatedly relive in my mind that morning in November when you flew into Hong Kong after I had telephoned you and asked you to marry me. We were wed at noon the same day, informing our parents by telegrams after the event. Lunch at Jimmy's Kitchen with half-a-dozen journalist friends was our wedding celebration. I found a small flat at Repulse Bay where in the evening we sat on the porch and watched the lights of the fishing junks sailing slowly across the horizon back to Aberdeen. I had resigned from Reuters to write a book and we were living on the little money I had saved. But we were too happy to worry about the future. It would take care of itself. And, fortunately, it did. As the money was running out and the prospect of the book being published faded, I was hired by The Washington Post.

Eventually, of course, our married life settled into a more standard routine, with the pressures and stresses experienced by most families. However, our mutual joy and pride in the achievements of our children was a stabilising factor in our relationship, which helped us restore harmony after fierce arguments. There were the usual childhood peccadillos but they avoided the dangerous temptations of Hong Kong, where, in the top expatriate schools, students peddled drugs, including heroin, which was as cheap as a chocolate bar.

So we were grateful that our son and daughter survived the perils of Hong Kong and made a successful transition to the scholastic system in Australia, when we moved there. There were heated discussions over education and careers in their adolescent years but then each found a path

that satisfied them and pleased us. About the same time that the children's future plans were taking shape, I was becoming reconciled to being old and having less money and acclaim than I had hoped for. At James's wedding to Erika where we held hands in the sudden mutual realisation of how much time had passed since we stood before the registrar in Hong Kong, you smiled at me with eyes shining with the happiness of the moment. The birth of your grand-daughter a year later brought you even greater delight. We seemed to have reached a point in our lives where we could enjoy together the years left to us without friction and with a renewed love and respect for each other. But the uncertainty of life renders imprudent such reassuring assumptions. The time given to you came abruptly to an end.

You should have had the delight of attending Catherine's wedding in a small church high on a hill overlooking Lake Geneva, with the sun shining brightly and the water glittering in the distance. It was a glorious day and I wanted so much to have you there to share it with me. You should have lived to see the four more grandchildren that were born to our children and their wives but the new additions to our family can only know their paternal grandmother from her photographs. Every time I seen them I am saddened by the fact that you have been deprived of a chapter in your life that I know would have brought you great pleasure.

I cannot help but imagine how different my life would have been if you had lived. You would have sensed immediately any change in the relationship between James and Erika and might have been able to prevent the break-up that now appears to be occurring. Certainly, if you had still been alive I would not be alone here in my flat in Kuala Lumpur, with my shirt clammy against my skin, while I wait for the latest blackout to end and the air-conditioning to come on again, and my eyes itching from the region-wide smoke haze caused by fires burning in Indonesian Sumatra. The radio is tuned to a Singapore all-news station - which invariably carries any important Malaysian development long before its is announced by Kuala Lumpur's government broadcaster - and the recorder is playing one of your Mozart tapes, an exquisite clarinet concerto. Funny isn't it that previously I was not much interested in Bach, Beethoven or Mozart. Now I listen mostly to classical composers, often with tears in my eyes as I am carried back to the time when you would be reading in the living room, with your favourite music filling the house, while I was working in my study. But dwelling on the past is a futile exercise and exacerbates my loneliness.

Today, I feel even more alone after my brief conversation with Erika earlier. I called to have a chat with James and to ask after the children. The telephone rang for a long time but it did not switch over to the answering machine so I waited. Finally Erika answered in a low, tremulous voice, with a sniff as she said, "Hello", which made me certain she had been crying.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She recognised my voice. "Your son is a real bastard, that's what's wrong." She forced a laugh to take the edge off her remark but it could not hide the bitterness in her voice.

Erika and I had always been close. She was more like a daughter than a daughter-in-law. You and I were entranced and delighted when James introduced us to an attractive and charming new girl-friend from Melbourne, whom we both thought was a perfect match for our son.

“What has James done, Erika?”

“Ask him. I just can’t believe what is happening to him and to us. Ask him why he married me in the first place and fathered three children and now says he only did it because of you and Siu Mei.”

“Are you two separating?” I asked, trying to make sense of her remarks.

I had concluded that their marriage was going through a rocky period when I took a ten day holiday in Australia three months earlier. I had been looking forward to staying with them at their home in Terrigal and spend some time with my grandchildren. But I did not enjoy my visit. James and Erika did not fight but it was clear they were avoiding open warfare only because I was a guest in the house. There was a constant tension between them and their remarks to each other were brief and lacking any humour or warmth. The children were unusually irritable. But I believed it would blow over and decided not to interfere.

“Ask your son. He said he was coming back,” she said, with a hint of uncertainty.

“When he comes back get him to call me, please Erika. Will you be all right?”

It was a dumb question but I did not know what else to say.

“I’ll ask him to call you.”

I hung up thinking I did not really want to talk to James because I feared he would confirm that their marriage was coming to an end. I wish you were here to talk to him and to Erika. You would know how to handle the situation, I am sure. I was never very good at human relations. That was your area of expertise. Unfortunately, however, I am on my own.

I miss you. Loving you always,

John

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## Chapter Four

Scott stared out through the window of his work-room at the grassy slope shaded by tall trees across the road from his apartment, taking a break from his abortive attempts to write the introduction to a story on the latest public tirade against the government by the sacked deputy leader Anwar Ibrahim. All he had to show for his efforts were five false starts which he had left on his computer in the hope that one of them could be turned into a meaningful paragraph. The hillside opposite, part of an extensive property leased by the Brunei Government to accommodate its Malaysian Ambassador and ancillary staff, was like a pleasing and familiar painting on the wall, to which Scott turned for inspiration. It was a serene outlook, in contrast to the cluttered scene

from the balcony of his apartment of the city skyline, with its high-rise office towers and government buildings. But on this morning his mind was too preoccupied with concern over the possibility that his son's marriage was breaking up to be calmed by the view.

Suddenly, three small monkeys appeared, scampering across the grass between the trees, as if they had been startled into flight. A moment later six men, walking in line with their heads and faces covered by scarves, advanced over the ridge at the top of the slope like a band of outlaws entering a cow town in a Hollywood western. But their menacing demeanour was an illusion, as Scott knew, their innocent intent proclaimed by the shrill whine of the small petrol motors on the grass cutters they were swinging from side to side. As the harsh sound came through his window, he slipped into Luddite mode, illogically hankering for the colonial past when the turf at roadside and in parks was kept trimmed by kneeling teams of Malays using small, hand-held scythes. His nostalgia was no doubt influenced by the fact that in those days he was a young man with no worries and Kuala Lumpur was a more relaxed city where Islam was not the oppressive and inhibiting influence it would become. His Malay Muslim friends were free to join him in a drink of beer without fear of arrest by Islamic clerics and when he was seized by the urge for female company he had the choice of numerous bars where it was possible to pick up girls. The mature Scott recognised guiltily that back then young women took up such employment because there was no other way to earn money. In modern Malaysia, government-encouraged investment by multi-nationals had created a plethora of factories employing men and women in the manufacture of televisions, computers and a range of other high-technology products. The females of the nation no longer needed to take up demeaning work to survive.

But his appreciation of the significant improvement in people's lives did not deter Scott from dwelling on the past. It was a carefree time to which he could escape for a few moments and forget the pain of his wife's death. His mind drifted back to his first visit to Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s when it was still a small town with a single, shabby hotel, the Malayan Star, where Charlie Smythe, the resident Reuter correspondent, had a permanent room and visiting journalists stayed. Scott had been sent from Singapore to help Charlie cover a conference of the Singapore and Malayan leaders and their defence chiefs on new plans to tackle the Communist insurgency. After picking up Scott at the airport and checking him into the hotel, Charlie, another young Australian, took him to a bar for a beer. Scott was immediately smitten with desire for the young Chinese girl who served him and lingered to flirt with him. He was negotiating a price for her to go back to the hotel with him when Charlie interrupted to say he had made other arrangements for the afternoon for both of them.

"You won't have to pay - except, maybe, for dinner," he said. "Finish up your beer. There's someone I want you to meet."

Telling the bar girl he would come and see her again, Scott followed Charlie out to his car. It turned out that his colleague had fallen in love with a young Malay woman working for the Australian Embassy and since he was planning to drive with her to Seremban the afternoon of Scott's arrival to try out a recommended Chinese restaurant, she had agreed to bring along a friend as a date for the visitor. The women were waiting for them at a teh-tarik stall near the embassy, which had closed for the afternoon, since it was a Friday, when devout Muslims went to mosques for special prayers. As they drove to the meeting place, Charlie explained that his girl-friend, Nuri,

and her friend, Yati, were moderate Muslims, like their parents, who had given them a private English-language school education and allowed them to wear Western clothes and work for foreign employees. It was still some years before conservative Islamic ideas became dominant in the country and women were pressured to conform to a fundamentalist dress code. However, all Malays were automatically deemed to be Muslims and Malay men took exception to Malay women associating with non-Muslim males, especially white foreigners. Accordingly, Charlie said, Nuri would only appear in public with him where there was a predominance of Chinese or foreign expatriates. And if Charlie wanted to marry Nuri, he would have to convert to the Islamic faith.

The two women were watching for Charlie's car and walked quickly from their table to the side of the road as he pulled over. Charlie had said Nuri was 20. Yati, small and slim with shoulder-length, raven hair framing a winsome face and nervous, dark eyes, looked one or two years younger. Nuri was prettier but Scott was immediately drawn to Yati by some undefinable allure of her slight frame and hesitant smile.

When the women were seated in the back of the car, Charlie turned to Nuri with a knowing grin and said: "We'll go back to the hotel for a while before we leave for Seremban. There's plenty of time."

Nuri smiled back at him and nodded but Yati looked unhappy.

"It's a long way to Seremban," she said. "We have to be back before the curfew." Under the State of Emergency declared as part of the struggle against the Communist terrorists, or CTs as they were known, travel into and out of Kuala Lumpur was banned after 6 p.m.

"Don't fret," Nuri said. "Charlie drives like a demon. We'll be back in time."

"Is the Seremban road safe?" Scott asked Charlie. "Didn't you write a story last week about an ambush just outside the town in which CTs killed an English rubber plantation manager and three Chinese working for him?"

"Yes but the army's stepped up patrols between KL and Seremban. We'll be fine. And if we're running a little bit late on the way back our press passes will get us back into the city."

At the Malayan Star Hotel, they rode in a shaking lift to the fourth floor, where both Charlie and Scott had rooms. Charlie took Nuri's hand and headed down the corridor.

"I'll knock on your door when we're ready to go," he said to Scott. "In about an hour."

As Yati looked uncertainly after them, Nuri told her: "You go with John."

The younger woman shook her head, provoking a rapid burst of Malay from Nuri, which Scott, who had been learning the closely-similar language of Indonesia, deciphered loosely as an entreaty to Yati not to spoil things for her friend.

"We might as well go to my room," Scott said, pointing to the second door from where they were

standing. “We can’t wait for them in the corridor.”

Yati reluctantly followed Scott into his room. After he had shut and locked the door, he closed the curtains on the single window, which looked out on an office building where a few Chinese were busy at desks, eschewing the short working day observed by Malays.

“Why did you lock the door?” Yati asked tremulously.

Scott stared at her in surprise. “It’s a normal security precaution. You don’t want someone barging into your room to rob you. Hey, don’t be scared, I’m not going to hurt you.”

But now that he was alone with the young Malay woman, he was unable to resist a compelling urge to move forward and put his arms around her. As he held her close to him, her body was trembling. Scott bent his head to kiss her but when his lips touched her face, Yati put her hands on his chest, trying unsuccessfully to push him away.

“No,” she whispered. “I’m not like Nuri. Let’s just talk while we’re waiting for them.”

Scott looked into her beautiful eyes for a moment before letting his arms drop to his side. He wanted her to like him, not think of him as a brute.

“Okay.” He motioned to a chair. “Sit down and tell me about yourself. Are you still studying or are you working?”

She sat down, watching him nervously, but relaxed a little as he sat in a chair opposite her.

“I’m still at university, studying law.”

“Really? That’s impressive. Are you finding it difficult?”

“Not yet. I got through the first year without too much trouble. But I seem to have to work harder this year.”

She asked Scott about his job and they chatted with increasing ease. He was irked when he heard the door chime and Charlie’s voice, wishing he could spend more time alone with Yati. When they went out into the corridor, Nuri was holding on to Charlie’s arm with a dreamy look in her eyes and he had an expression of smug satisfaction on his face. Yati led the way to the lift without a word to her friend.

The traffic was light in Kuala Lumpur, due to the early closure of government offices and some shops, as they headed towards the southern outskirts of the city. Soon they had left the Malaysian capital and were on the two-lane highway to Seremban, passing between rubber estates and kampungs almost hidden by palm trees, where chickens scratched the dusty soil and children chased one another around and under atap-roofed huts on stilts. Intermittently, the road ran close to thickly-forested areas, which Scott’s imagination filled with lurking CTs.

Suddenly, as they rounded a bend their way was blocked by a barricade manned by armed men.

“Jesus!” Scott exclaimed with alarm.

“It’s okay,” Charlie said as he braked. “It’s a Malay Regiment road block. They’re in charge of security for this part of the road.”

Scott was reassured to see the armed men were wearing British-issue jungle greens and cloth caps. Some were carrying light Sten guns in their hands but most had World War II rifles slung over their shoulders, which seemed proportionately too big for their small Malay frames. They were all young and looked like cadets who had been sent on a training march from a secondary school. But Scott knew the Malay Regiment had gained a fearsome reputation as a fighting force in the war against the communist guerillas.

As the car slowed to a halt, a Malay of about 30, with the shoulder bars of a lieutenant, stepped forward and saluted.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he said, addressing Charlie. “What is your destination?”

“Seremban,” Charlie replied.

“Are you planning to return to Kuala Lumpur today?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll need to keep your visit to Seremban brief in order to be back before the curfew.”

Charlie nodded. “We’ll only be staying there for a short time.”

The officer’s eyes had been on Charlie as they talked. Having given his cautionary advice about the curfew, he shifted his gaze to Scott before glancing at the back seat, where Nuri and Yati were sitting. Scott did not see any alteration in his expression but there was a noticeable change in his manner. Before seeing the two Malay woman he had been courteous but detached. Abruptly, there was a coldness in his voice as he addressed Charlie again.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we will have to inspect your car. It’s a routine practice. Would you and your passengers please get out of the car. And would you also be so kind as to open the bonnet and the boot.”

Scott was certain the officer had been about to wave them on their way when he spotted Nuri and Yati. The sight of the Malay women in a car with orang asing - foreigners - had clearly caused him to change his mind. His politeness no longer sounded sincere as he added: “It shouldn’t take long.”

Charlie looked annoyed but was wise enough not to say anything. He pulled the knob that released the bonnet, opened his door and walked to the back of the car, where he unlatched the boot with a key. At the same time, Scott stepped onto the road and beckoned the women to follow. They held

back until he said through their open window: "Come on, you can't stay in the car."

They emerged with obvious reluctance, looking down at the ground so they did not have to meet the disapproving stares of the lieutenant or his troops. Their discomfort was palpable as they stood at the side of the road with some 36 pairs of eyes fixed on them. Scott was thankful that they were wearing the traditional baju, which covered them from their shoulders to their ankles. But the dresses were made from expensive and vibrant fabrics with unconventional patterns and the two young women looked out of place in the jungle environment with their high-heeled shoes, carefully groomed hair, and a touch of colour on their lips.

The lieutenant, who had been joined by a sergeant and corporal in a methodical inspection of the vehicle from top to bottom, took his time. He directed the corporal to put on a glove and run his hand over and under every section of the engine, take out and examine the battery and unscrew the cap of the radiator, a step that was presumably included in the standard check list to ensure there was nothing there but water. The examination of the engine took 20 minutes and it was another 45 minutes before the lieutenant was prepared to let them continue their journey. He again reminded Charlie about the curfew and said no one would be allowed to proceed past his check point into Kuala Lumpur after the deadline. His steely manner left Scott in little doubt their press passes would not alter the officer's stand on this question.

"We'll make our visit to Seremban very short," Charlie said.

"Of course, I'll have to inspect your car on your return journey," the lieutenant told him.

Charlie looked as if he was about to make a remark but kept his mouth shut. As he started the car Nuri said abruptly: "I want to go back to Kuala Lumpur."

"It's too late to go to Seremban," Yati added. "Please take us home."

"Bloody hell," Charlie said. "Women!"

"Let's do what they say, Charlie," Scott said, sensing the humiliation Nuri and Yati felt. "We don't want to spend another hour here on our way back from Seremban."

Charlie stared at Scott for a moment, then stuck his head out of the window and shouted to the lieutenant. "We've changed our minds. We'll go to Seremban another day."

The officer did not say anything. He stood with an expressionless face as Charlie made a U-turn and headed back to the capital.

The women were silent throughout the ride back to Kuala Lumpur. Nuri ignored several attempts by Charlie to engage her in conversation and he finally ceased talking and hummed to himself until they reached her home in one of the capital's better residential areas. Yati said she would go with her friend and slid out of the car without even saying goodbye.

That night, after they had dined at an Indian restaurant, Scott persuaded Charlie to go with him to

the bar where they had been in the morning but, to his disappointment, the girl who had served him was not there. None of the other women interested him or Charlie so when they had each drunk a beer they went back to their hotel to sleep.

The next day they were busy covering the conference and did not finish filing their stories until after nine in the evening. They were both so tired that they had a late dinner at the hotel and went immediately to bed. Scott had to return to Indonesia the following morning and left for the airport before Charlie was awake. From time to time, over the next few weeks, he thought about the Chinese and Malay women he had met briefly in Kuala Lumpur and resolved to renew his acquaintance with them when he next had a chance to visit Malaysia. But then he met the woman who would become his wife and they faded from his memory.

Nuri, meanwhile, made it plain to Charlie that they could not continue their relationship unless he demonstrated his devotion to her by becoming a Muslim without delay. When Scott met his colleague in Singapore three months later, Charlie was still wrestling with the question of whether he was prepared to feign commitment to a religion, which he considered suffocating and riddled with irrationalities, for the sake of love. His mind was made up for him by Reuters, which posted him to Tokyo. Subsequently, he met and married a Japanese.

In 1967, as Scott walked into a Kuala Lumpur supermarket to buy some toothpaste during a working visit to Malaysia from his base in Hong Kong, he was approached by a Malay woman holding the hand of a little girl. It was Nuri. She told him she had married a Malay civil servant and had two sons as well as the daughter. She inquired about Charlie and Scott said he too was married. Then he asked her whether Yati had also found a husband and she started to cry. She said that soon after her friend had graduated with a law degree, she had been diagnosed with leukemia. At first she had responded well to treatment but then had suffered a relapse and died earlier that year. Scott was saddened by the news, but felt no personal sense of loss. His brief meeting with Yati seemed so long ago. He summoned up some consoling words, then they said their goodbyes and parted. Scott had not tried to get in touch with Nuri on subsequent trips to Kuala Lumpur from Hong Kong or after he moved there from Singapore in 1995. Although he carried a tender memory of Yati in his mind, his meeting with her and Nuri was, for him, merely a brief interlude in his long and active career as a journalist.

Now, thinking back to that day, more than 40 years earlier, Scott realised that while the incident on the road to Seremban may not have been of major consequence to him, it had most probably been a defining event for the two women. They had been forced to examine themselves in the context of their society and to determine the manner in which they should conduct themselves. They had reaffirmed to themselves that while they may have been modern in outlook, they were still Malays and Muslims in a Malay Muslim world.

Scott had liked to think of himself as a concerned observer of the communities to which he had been sent as a foreign correspondent, who could be moved by people's poverty or distress but did not involve himself except by way of reporting what he saw and experienced. He felt fortunate that he was not constrained in the choice of what he did by any religious canons or cultural proscriptions. Accordingly, he had never had to deal with a moral dilemma of the kind confronting Nuri and Yati. His brief, he believed, was to remain detached, where possible, while trying to

show sensitivity to local conventions. His job, as he saw it, was to respond to the major social, political and economic developments occurring in the countries he was covering by writing articles that were as truthful and illuminating as he could make them. But looking back now, he wondered if his detachment had been a defensive mechanism to avoid confronting the enormous difference in living conditions between him and the mass of people in the poorer countries he visited.

Although on many occasions his work had placed him in dangerous situations, including being arrested by military police in Indonesia, shot at in a war zone and almost killed in a helicopter crash, he accepted these unpleasantnesses as part of his life as a foreign correspondent. Unlike people who lived in poverty under repressive regimes in developing countries, he could always return to his economically-advanced and essentially-free homeland. When he visited Asian capitals, he stayed in better-class hotels and when he was assigned to report from a nation for a year or two, he rented accommodation in residential areas developed for wealthier citizens and expatriates. He liked to think that, nevertheless, he always made an effort to communicate with the common man and woman and through his contacts with such local sources as journalists and social workers was probably more closely in touch with community feelings and aspirations than most foreigners, apart from members of non-government-organisations. But there had been many occasions when he had been surprised by public behaviour in the face of a political crisis or natural disaster. The older he got, the less certain he became that he was as informed as he ought to be about the people in the region in which he had worked most of his life. Did he really know anything about what was going on their minds? He didn't even know what was going on between his son and his daughter-in-law.

That realisation brought him abruptly back to the present and the new uncertainty. He had believed that, on returning to Sydney after another one or two more years in the field, he could look forward to visiting the home of James and his wife and relaxing with his grandchildren and their parents in a happy family environment. However, if his son's marriage was breaking up, this aspiration would never be realised.

He was suddenly aware that James hadn't called back. That increased his anxiety about the state of the relationship between his son and daughter-in-law. If it was coming to an end, James would not want to talk to his father, knowing that he would be upset by such a development. But Scott had to find out what was happening. He picked up the hand-piece of the telephone and keyed in the numbers for his son's house in Sydney.

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Chapter Five

September 15, 1998

My dearest Siu Mei,

I finally talked to James and the situation is worse than I imagined. In fact it is beyond my imagination. I am sitting here at my desk in Kuala Lumpur feeling quite dumbfounded. Why did I ever come back to Asia? I should be in Sydney where I have old friends I could talk to. Here I

have new friends but I do not feel close to them.

God, I am so lonely here in Malaysia. I ache with loneliness. It is like a saline drip seeping into a vein and spreading through my body, replacing the warm blood with a cold, emptiness. At night I go to a bar in Bangsar where I drink more beers than I should and watch pretty young Chinese women sipping coffee in Starbucks across the street. I long to find one who can make me feel again the way I felt for you. But I know that is impossible. And, anyway, I also know that if they look at me they will see only an old man, who is of no interest to them. I even talk to the shabby men on street corners offering “nice girls, very young”. I am so tempted to buy a woman to take home I ask the price and take their cards, with single names, like Jimmy and Harry, and telephone numbers. I want a warm woman’s body lying beside me in my bed at night but I cannot bring myself to take home one who has been with other men on other nights. And with whom there would unlikely be any affection, far less love.

This is a depressing country. It is a more tense society today than it was 30 years ago. The racial climate has changed. In the prevailing environment of Malay Muslim privilege and domination the dream of a true Malaysian identity has died. The Islamic creed is pervasive. Malay women emerge from government offices at the end of the day like nuns from a convent, sexless in their face-encircling tudungs and ankle-length garments. Malay men sip their teh-tarik at street stalls, gossip and go to the mosque, doing as little work as possible. Chinese and Indians live their separate lives. It is a dismal place. The foreign media, me included, is constantly reviled.

Perhaps I am unfair and it is just my disposition. Following my return to Asia three years after I heard the bus on which you were travelling stop outside our home, followed by the screech of a car’s tyres gripping the road and the terrible thump of metal striking a body, I have applied myself to work. It has not been easy with the memory of that horrendous night recurring repeatedly but I knew I had to pull myself out of the deep depression that overwhelmed me or lose my will to live. Arriving in Singapore I had to relearn how to be a foreign correspondent. Much had changed. I was no longer young and eager. I had to teach myself how to file a story from my computer through a modem and telephone line to London and Australia. It seems only yesterday I was tapping a typewriter and carrying sheets of paper to a post office for transmission to my employers by Morse key or teletype machine. I had to educate myself all over again on the political machinations of South East Asia.

Many times, I felt like packing up and returning to Australia. But I battled on. At first, I was earning only a trickle of money from one English newspaper. It hardly paid for my food, far less the rent. However, after a time, I had picked up other strings and had enough money on which to get by. And, gradually, with the passage of the years, and my dogged fixation on work, I managed to achieve a peace of mind as I came to see how fortunate we were to have had each other for three joyous decades. But my relative balance has been shaken by what I have now been told.

James did not return my call so, having waited 24 hours, I telephoned his home in the Sydney suburb of St. Ives again. James answered and when he heard my voice he spoke in a nervous and defensive manner.

“What did Erika tell you?” he asked.

“Nothing. She told me nothing apart from the fact that you are a bastard. Oh, and she also said you only married her because of me and your mother, whatever that means. What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“Well, when can we talk about it.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. “Probably the next time I see you.”

“Well, I’m not planning a Sydney visit until at least next month. Erika told me a couple of weeks ago that you might be going to Singapore to discuss a tie-up between Bennelong and a local advertising company. Is that trip on? I can fly down from KL and meet you.”

James did not answer immediately. “Are you there?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “The last time we talked you said Malaysian politics were keeping you busy.”

“I can get away for a day or two. When will you be in Singapore?”

“The weekend after next. I’m due to arrive on Saturday, September 26.

“Where are you staying.”

“Traders’ Hotel.”

“Okay. I’ll call you when I get into Singapore and set up a time for a meeting. Listen, I hope you and Erika can sort out your problems and keep your marriage intact. Every couple goes through rocky periods. If there’s another woman, ask yourself is it really worth it. As a foreign correspondent travelling around Asia from our home in Hong Kong, I found there were lots of temptations. As an ad man with clients to see throughout Australian and New Zealand you must experience the same kind of situations. Remember, you have the children to think about. When you and your sister were little, I just had to look at you asleep in your beds at night to remind me of the importance of keeping the family together.”

“Some marriages reach a stage where they are impossible to save, children or no children,” James said, sharpening my anxiety that his relationship with Erika was in serious trouble.

“Let’s talk about it in Singapore before you take any drastic action,” I urged.

“I’ll see you there,” he said.

“I guess you’re looking forward to the trip,” I said, trying to remain calm and pleasant. “Your bosses will be pleased if you can seal the deal.”

“Unfortunately, I won’t be alone. The senior creative director, Maurice Meckleson, is going along to see I don’t slip up, as he puts it. He’s a racist son of a bitch, who I can’t stand.”

Although James looks more like you than me, he has rarely run into racism. I could sense he was angry at having to face it in his agency.

After we had said goodbye, I began to worry that the marriage might have irreversibly collapsed by the time I had a chance to talk to James. I decided to call Erika's sister Hannah to discover how close my son and his wife were to breaking up. I knew Erika talked regularly to Hannah, who had moved to Singapore with her husband when he was appointed South-East Asian representative of an Australian software company specialising in information technology for banks. Since I moved back to South-East Asia, I had visited Hannah's house a couple of times when Erika was staying there with the children.

"Hi, Hannah," I said, when she answered my call. "It's John. How are you?"

"Fine."

"I've been talking to Erika and James and obviously something's wrong between them. But they were both unwilling to discuss it with me. I was hoping you might be able to tell me what's caused this blow-up between them and whether their marriage is in danger."

"I'd say the marriage is finished," she said with anger in her voice, adding, to my astonishment: "Your son has ruined my sister's life."

"It takes two to cause a marriage break down," I replied mildly.

"Not in this case."

"Is there another woman?"

"Not a woman. A man."

My mind repudiated the implication of her statement.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's gay. Your son is gay."

"That's ridiculous. It's impossible." I searched for a reason why it was impossible. "He married your sister."

"Yes, lamentably. And ruined her life. Twelve years of marriage and now she finds that the man she gave her heart and soul to is a homosexual."

"Hannah, for God's sake, what you're saying can't be true. You are talking about my son. He's not gay. I'd know if he was gay."

"How would you know? Erika didn't know until he came back from a trip to Perth and admitted

he had a gay affair while he was away. That was last year. At first James said he had made a mistake and wanted to keep the family together and Erika believed him. But then she found a diary full of disgusting details about him meeting up with this guy again several times. They had a big row and he walked out. But after a week he told her he wanted to come back and she let him - against my advice. Every time he goes away she worries that he's seeing the old boy friend or has found a new one. He denies it. But I think he's going to leave her any day now."

"You say this has been going on since last year. Erika's never given me a hint until now of any trouble."

"They decided not to tell you anything about it."

I felt my mind throwing up the same barriers of disbelief that blocked my senses for a time as I stared down at your lifeless body all those years ago.

"I can't believe it," I said.

"You don't want to believe it. Erika doesn't want to believe it. She said he's suffering an early mid-life crisis or something. She doesn't want to accept that she has been living with, sleeping with and having sex with a man who wasn't what she thought he was. She doesn't want to acknowledge the fact that the man she held in her arms night after night would rather be in bed with another man. Erika's a staunch Catholic. They were married in a Catholic church, you'll remember. That makes it even more difficult for her. This man, your son, who fathered her three children, has treated her with unforgivable callousness

"Can you imagine how she must feel in this situation? It would be bad enough if he was leaving her for another woman. But a man? Her self-esteem has been shattered but she's trying to patch it up by deceiving herself that he will get over this 'mistake' and be a good husband to her and good father to his children. But he won't and I don't know whether she will be able to handle that."

"But why would he remain married to Erika for so long if he was gay?"

"Ask him," she said and hung up.

I decided I had to talk to Erika again and called the Sydney number.

She had stopped crying but her, "Hello", was subdued in contrast with her usual bubblyness.

"Hello, Erika. I've been talking to your sister. She said James was gay. But that doesn't make any sense at all. What is this all about?"

"Oh, God. I don't know. And I told Hannah not to say anything to you about this. I knew it would be a shock to you. He says he's been trying to find his real self for years and now he knows he's gay. I don't know what to think. Sometimes, he's the wonderful man I married but other times, I just don't know him. He's had to work more hours since he was given several big accounts and that's put him under a strain. We've had money troubles, which he blames on me, and he's been

talking about leaving the agency, which would be stupid. He's emotionally unstable. I think he's near a nervous breakdown. He can't be really gay. It's just an escape thing."

"I can't believe that he's gay. For God's sake, I would have seen some sign of it. You seemed to have a good marriage."

"Yes, we did. I don't know what to do. Mother wants me to kick him out and tell him never to come back. Then find a lawyer to be sure he has to take care of me and the children. But I'm going to try and hold on to him."

"That's the best thing to do. You must feel terrible. How are the children coping?"

"Linda is taking it very badly. She's heard enough to know relations between her mother and father are at breaking point. Sarah's irritable all the time. Paul is still too young to understand the angry exchanges between me and James but he must be feeling the tension." I knew she would be especially worried about Paul, who was named after his grandfather and already had some of his facial features.

I told Erika I would call her again after I had talked to James in Singapore. Then I sat staring at the telephone, succumbing to a new melancholy. I had pulled myself out of the depression caused by your death with the support of James and Catherine but now that James's family unit was falling apart he had ceased to represent the strength and stability I needed to provide me with an emotional buffer. Since Catherine was living in London with her family, I had come to rely on my visits to James, Erika and their children to prevent me from sliding back into despair. James had always been the rock of our family, the stable one, who was calm and cool when everyone else was shouting. He was always the peacemaker. But now there was a confusion in my mind about him.

Oh, Siu, I am deeply apprehensive about the children's future if James and Erika split up. It is difficult for me to accept that their marriage may be over, far less the crazy idea of James being homosexual. Perhaps I am too old-fashioned in my views on marriage and divorce. It is an age when many people prefer a "partnership" that can easily be ended to marriage "for life".

Loving you always,

John

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## Chapter Six

Scott would normally have booked into a hotel when he was visiting Singapore but he did not think it would be a suitable place for his meeting with James. A hotel room was too cramped and a lobby would be noisy and crowded. He was still undecided on a venue when one presented itself.

Laurie Farmer called and Scott remembered his colleague had given him an open invitation to stay in the grand colonial-era house in Singapore that had been the South-East Asian headquarters of correspondents of the Melbourne Argosy newspaper for more than 20 years. Farmer lived alone in the two-storey residence, except when he had a steady girl friend, but spent much of his time travelling to neighbouring countries, leaving it in the charge of a Filipina servant. He had telephoned from Indonesia to discuss the latest developments in the political drama in Malaysia. Scott and Farmer were correspondents of competing newspapers but they were also old friends, who exchanged ideas on the general nature of the stories they were covering without disclosing the content of any exclusive features they might be writing.

“What do you reckon they’ll do about Anwar?” Farmer asked.

Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister, had been sacked from Cabinet and expelled from the United Malays National Organisation, the dominant party in the ruling coalition, after an ill-conceived attempt to push the Prime Minister out of office before he was prepared to go. He was now touring the country attacking the government and trying to build up a groundswell of support among the public that would force his UMNO colleagues to bring him back into the party and turn against the Prime Minister.

“If he keeps on talking the way he is, they’ll probably arrest him under the Sedition Act.”

“If that happens you can expect to see my happy smiling face in KL and I’ll expect you to buy me a beer.”

“You’re on. In the meantime, I’m meeting my son in Singapore on the twenty-sixth and wondered whether I might take up your longtime offer of accommodation in your elegant mansion. I would fly down on the afternoon of Friday, the twenty-fifth, and return to KL on the Sunday .”

“No worries, mate. The house is yours for the weekend. I’m planning to be in Jakarta for another couple of weeks. Orgies if you like. I’ll tell Maria to expect you on Saturday. She takes off Sunday to congregate with her Filipina friends on Orchard Road but I’m sure you can look after yourself for a day. By the way, talking of orgies, I was speaking to a Singapore diplomat who thinks it’s significant that the KL papers are giving considerable attention to old allegations of sexual hanky-panky by Anwar.”

“Yes, I’d noticed that. They first appeared in a poison-pen letter a year ago, when the PM dismissed them, and have now been published in a book. Perhaps the government hopes the charges will discredit him and make it more difficult for him to gain public support.”

“Yeah, could be. We may have an interesting story on our hands yet.”

Scott had just put down the receiver when the telephone rang again.

“You didn’t call me.”

“I was going to,” he said.

“I don’t believe you. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I don’t really care whether or not you call.”

In his mind he could see Siti looking pretty and petulant as she sat at her desk in a room in the national parliament near the office of the Speaker.

“How are you?” he asked.

“How am I?” She emphasised the I, implying with the tone of her voice that she doubted his interest in her well being.

“I think I will leave this job. The minister who has been annoying me came by to get some papers and told me I was giving him bad thoughts. He says it’s the way I dress. I always have this problem with the men here. I hate Malay men. Just because I don’t wear a tudung I have to put up with their insults.”

It’s not just because you don’t wear a head covering. It’s because you are so damned sexy, Scott thought to himself.

“Where will you go?” he asked.

“Pak Ali will help me find another job.” Pak Ali was Mohamed Ali Shamsuddin, the Speaker and a close friend of her late father. Siti had worked in several government departments in a senior capacity. Knowing Pak Ali had always been a help but her superior intelligence and perfect English made her welcome in areas of the administration where there was always a need for a smart person with translation skills. From the age of 12 to 16, when her father was a senior civil servant in Johor, she had been driven across the Causeway each week day to Singapore to attend the Raffles Girls School, where English was the medium of instruction. Her attendance at a school where her fellow students were predominantly Chinese had given her a more liberal outlook than if she had been educated like other Malaysian Malays in her country’s education system. But she had retained her strong Islamic beliefs and reinforced her distaste of Chinese - apart from one or two friends - which was widespread within her race. They want to take over our country, she told Scott again and again, although he had often reminded her that this was unlikely to happen since Malays outnumbered the Chinese by almost two to one and held political power.

“Would you like me to come and see you?” she asked. It was never, I’d like to come and see you.

“Yes. But not this week. There’s too much going on. Some time next week?”

“I ‘m going to visit my mother in Kota Baru for a few days next week but I’ll be back on Thursday. I could come over after parliament closes for Friday prayers.”

“The twenty-fifth? I’m flying to Singapore that Friday.”

“How long will you be away?”

“Just a couple of days.”

“Why don’t you take me?” she asked with a laugh that was intended to infer she was only joking. He knew she would like to visit Singapore with him. But on her terms.

“Okay. I’ll book a hotel room.”

“You know I can’t stay in the same room as you.”

“Taking two rooms would be expensive - and not much fun.”

“What are you doing in Singapore?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Meeting my son. He’ll be there for the weekend on business. I hope nothing happens here to make me cancel my trip. Do you think Anwar will be arrested?”

“Probably. They can’t let him run around telling the truth about this corrupt government.”

Siti was not a fan of her government although she was paid by it.

“What are people saying about the revival of the old sexual allegations against him?”

“I don’t know what other people are saying but I think it’s a vicious attempt to smear his name. They even accuse him of having sexual relations with men. That is ridiculous. You might find that disgusting behaviour among people who don’t follow the teachings of Islam but it most certainly is not something that is practised among the Malay people. Their faith in their religion is strong. And Anwar is one of the most devout Muslims in our country.”

“You are mistaken in thinking there are no Malay homosexuals, Siti. Take a stroll along Jalan Bukit Bintang one night. You will observe at least a dozen pimps offering young Malay boys as well as girls to male passers-by. And their customers are not only foreigners.”

“They cannot be Muslims. Islam forbids it. Sex between men of any age is a sin.”

“It’s also against the law in Malaysia. But making it a crime hasn’t put an end to homosexual conduct in your country or other countries.”

“There may be a few depraved people in Malaysia but they do not include true Muslims like Anwar.”

It struck him that just as he could not believe that his son was gay, Siti refused to concede that Anwar might have been involved in homosexual activities. Could they both be wrong? The possibility perturbed him.

“Perhaps you can come and see me the following week. I’ll call you when I get back.”

“If you like.”

He said goodbye and hung up. It was an odd relationship. He was almost twice Siti's age. As a Western journalist, he was a member of a group constantly denounced by the Malaysian Prime Minister and media. As a public servant and a Muslim, she was breaking covenants of her government and faith by associating with a non-believing foreign newsmen. But where Malaysia was concerned, Siti was a curious mixture of rebel and patriot - often criticising the nation's leaders but defending her country staunchly if Scott made any adverse comments. And on religious matters, her approach was sometimes liberal and sometimes conservative. For some reason, she was clearly attracted to Scott. She married at 22 to the son of a family friend. But the marriage ended seven years later when she found out that her husband had set up a 19-year-old student in an apartment after Siti had refused to allow him to take a second wife. Islam permitted four wives but Siti, like many modern Malaysian women, argued that the Prophet advocated polygamy only to provide homes for widows and destitute older women, not to allow men to take additional young brides. She would not have found it easy to divorce her husband in the male-oriented sharia system if she had not had the support of Pak Ali and other prominent friends of her father. She had not remarried and, now 34, she lived with her ten-year-old daughter.

Scott had first sighted Siti in the corridors of the parliament building when he went there to pick up a copy of the budget. She was talking with a Malaysian woman journalist, whom he knew, and he stopped to say hello and be introduced to the strikingly-attractive stranger. Her lustrous long black hair hanging down to her shoulders set her apart from most of the other women working for the government who covered their heads with the face-enclosing tudung or a scarf. Her smile washed over him like a beautiful wave of light. They exchanged only a few words but he was almost immediately infatuated by her pretty face and quirky demeanour. He could not get her out of his mind. He had often wondered whether he was trying to recapture the magical moment on his first visit to Kuala Lumpur four decades again when he briefly held the trembling body of a young Malay woman in his arms in his hotel room. An older Yati, if she had lived, would be someone like Siti, he imagined.

For several weeks he found excuses to go to parliament house and by hanging around the corridors talking with government officials or journalists managed to see her and talk briefly with her several times. Eventually, he summoned up the courage to invite her to have dinner with him.

"I am very busy," she said.

It was not an outright refusal so he asked: "May I telephone you? Do you have a direct number?"

"Maybe I will call you. Your number is in the press directory."

She called him two days later and they dined at his favourite restaurant in Bangsar. He learned she was born in Kelantan, where her mother now lived. It was the poorest state in Malaysia and ruled by the opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia, known as PAS, whose leaders were fundamentalist Islamic clerics. The Chief Minister of Kelantan, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the party's spiritual leader, regularly featured in the media with his bizarre religious pronouncements, such as requiring Kelantan supermarkets to have separate check-out counters for men and women. Siti considered the man called Tok Guru, or venerated teacher, a hero for his spartan life-style, in contrast with most top government people, but chose to ignore his decree that a woman should cover herself

from head to toe.

She wanted to know where Scott lived so one night he drove her to his apartment block, which was hard to find if you did not know its exact location. But she balked at going with him to his apartment when she saw the caretaker seated in the lobby.

“He’s Indonesian, not Malay,” Scott said.

“I just wanted to see the outside. It’s not a very big building.”

He laughed. “No, it’s not your usual expatriate condo. But it’s close to government offices - and parliament.”

He took her home but some days later she surprised him by turning up on his doorstep. She had driven over from parliament during her lunch hour. It became a regular ritual. She would eat one of his sandwiches and flirt with him. Then return to her office.

She went as far as she thought she could go within the bounds of her religion - although Nik Aziz would certainly take exception to her interpretation of the limits. She would sit on his knees and let him hug her briefly. But she would not let him touch her breasts or kiss her. They were both aware that they were committing khalwat - literally, “close proximity” - an offence for which she could be imprisoned and he could be deported. Under sharia or Islamic law a man and woman who were not married or related were prohibited from being together unaccompanied. Those who failed to comply with this fiat and were found in “close proximity” were deemed to have committed khalwat. Newspapers regularly reported instances of religious officials and citizens recruited as “witnesses” pouncing on randy villagers copulating behind bushes or bursting through hotel room doors to catch more high-profile couples in a naked embrace. It was a common occurrence for well-known personalities, unwed or married to someone else, to appear before sharia judges after being caught in raids on hotel rooms booked for a night.

Scott had the absurd sensation that he was back in his youth, passionately embracing a girl outside her home amid fears one of her parents would suddenly open the front door.

Once he asked Siti: “Why haven’t you married again? You must have had lots of proposals.”

“I don’t like Malay men. They are all the same. Like my husband.”

“Do you like Australians?” he asked, teasingly.

“Some.”

“Would you marry an Australian?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. But he would have to be a Muslim.”

“Would you marry someone like me?” The question was out before he fully realised what he was

saying.

“Would you convert to Islam?”

Now it was out in the open. Was he so infatuated by Siti that, to begin with, he wanted to marry her and, secondly, he was prepared to go through the process of becoming a Muslim. He did not belong to any formal faith and considered himself an agnostic. He had read the Koran and decided that much of it was admirable counsel on how one should conduct one's life. But he was repelled by the manner in which clerics interpreted the Koran and the hadith - the Prophet's reported sayings - to oppose progress, restrict personal freedoms and reduce women to chattels.

Additionally, he was appalled by the brutal penalties for such offences as adultery that were imposed in a number of Islamic countries and supported by Nik Aziz and his party. Two friends, an Australian and an Englishman, had gone through a process of conversion, with the help of friendly clerics, but treated it merely as a means to an end - their marriage to the women they loved. Unlike most good Muslims, they did not pray five times a day or go to the mosque for Friday prayers. Scott was not the kind of man who could take conversion lightly. If he could not bring himself to believe in the main precepts of Islam, he could not adopt it as his religion.

Accordingly, since Siti made it clear she would only marry a Muslim, there was no possibility of her becoming his bride. After he had gone through this reasoning, he was oddly relieved.

“I would have to think about it,” he said in reply to her question.

She did not press him on the issue and appeared to be satisfied with continuing their dangerous but innocent liaisons. Many times he had wished she was a young Chinese woman without inhibitions, who would provide him with the sex and affection he craved. But now he put Siti out of his mind as he began to think of what he would say to his son when he met him in Singapore.

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Chapter Seven

September 18, 1998

My dearest Siu Mei,

I feel as if I have exchanged places with another John Scott in a parallel universe where life is not orderly and rational, as I once knew it, but abnormal and unpredictable. How else could I have ended up in this increasingly insane situation? Life is change, I told myself after your death. But this is more than change. It is an upheaval.

I decided I needed to tell Catherine what I had learned and sent her an email. I told her I had been surprised to discover that James and Erika seemed to be heading for divorce. I had been even more astonished by Hannah's assertion that James was gay.

“How he has reached this conclusion, God only knows,” I wrote. “Erika says he has been suffering

from stress. She thinks that it is a combination of work stress and money troubles. They lost a bundle in that wonky investment scheme James and his agency colleagues were conned into. It sounds to me like these twin pressures have given him such an emotional shock that he's running away from reality. Try to talk some sense into him. He'll listen to you. You and James have always been close. He needs to think about what this is doing to Erika and the children. And if he starts acting like he's gay, it could damage his career."

Catherine's reply was brief and disconcerting. It said: "You must accept James for what he is. He is going through a very difficult period in his life. He is trying to find his true identity and we must give him all the support we can."

I stared at her message with growing dismay. Catherine had provided no help and was apparently unconcerned about James's out-of-character behaviour. The more I think about what Hannah said the more confused I am. I do not believe James is truly gay but he seems to have decided to deny his real character by wrapping himself in the cloak of homosexuality

Before, I was just worried. Now, I find myself trying to stop an anger that is growing within me. How could James do this? He seems to be thinking only of himself, showing no regard for the needs of his wife or children as he pursues some obsessive quest for self-enlightenment or whatever it is that is driving him to this destructive course. Good God, we all suffer from periods of severe anxiety and depression but the answer does not lie in sacrificing everything you have achieved or endangering your career. This merely creates greater problems for you and the people closest to you.

I decided I needed to talk to Catherine and dispute her assertion that we should be giving James our support. While she seemed set in her stance, I was nevertheless optimistic that I might persuade her to talk some sense into James, who had always looked up to his older sister when they were little. But discussing the issue with her turned out to be a mistake. Just a couple of weeks earlier, we were talking amicably about my life in Kuala Lumpur and how I was looking forward to seeing my grand-daughters again on my visit to London later in the year. The action taken by James has radically affected our relationship.

When I called Catherine at her home in London, she began addressing the development in a pedagogical manner as if we were engaged in a scientific discussion of homosexuality rather than facing a family crisis. I was frustrated by the immediate realisation that she did not see James's actions with a viewpoint similar to mine. And I was uncertain how to proceed once it became clear that she believed James should be allowed to follow the path he had chosen. Do all fathers find it difficult to discuss serious questions with their children? You remind yourself that they are no longer children but still find it hard to adjust to their assertion of adult equality in contentious situations. I suppose in this case I wanted understanding and sympathy as I grappled with what was happening but none was shown. Perhaps Catherine thought it was the only way to deal with me in my unhappy state.

When I suggested that I found it hard to accept how anyone could decide they were gay in their mid-thirties after marrying and having children, Catherine said it was not something that had happened suddenly.

“James told me he had a crush on a teenage friend,” she said. “Psychologists are now saying that sexual orientation probably develops between the ages of one and three. He has probably been a suppressed homosexual since he was a child.”

“Yet he went ahead and married Erika. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Erika pushed him into marriage. She forced him to marry her. She wanted to have children. And he wanted to please you and Mum.”

“That’s absurd, Catherine. I think it’s quite unfair to accuse Erika of forcing him to marry her. For God’s sake, he lived with her, in a de facto relationship for several years before they had their church wedding. He chose to do that, to live with her and have sex with her. It was his choice.”

“He was struggling with his real feelings all this time, suppressing his true sexual orientation,” Catherine said.

I shook my head in exasperation. “Isn’t it more likely that this is all a fantasy concocted by his mind to cope with the stress of losing a lot of money, reaching a critical point in his career and experiencing a rough patch in his marriage. It seems to me that, subconsciously, he’s looking for a way to escape from the reality of these pressures to a Never-Never Land represented by the responsibility-free life of the gay men he sees in Sydney, who thumb their noses at the straight world every year with a Mardi Gras. And to provide justification for abdicating his family responsibilities, he seizes on a crush he had for a teenage friend as proof that he too is gay.”

Catherine spoke with a precise, didactic intonation as if she was talking to her daughters. “James has no intention of abdicating his responsibilities. He is very conscious of his obligations to his children. Dad, it’s you who wants to escape from reality - from the reality of having a son who has been a suppressed homosexual since he was a child.”

How in the world had my life become so topsy-turvy that I was sitting in an apartment in Kuala Lumpur talking across thousands of miles to my daughter in London about the professed homosexuality of her brother? I wished that I was sitting with her in the kitchen of her home in Wandsworth sipping a new Burgundy that her wine-loving husband Alan had discovered while the happy chatter of my grand-daughters filtered through from the living room and the only issue before us was to decide what I would like to eat for dinner. But here I was trying to find some way to have her agree with me and tell me she would talk to James and gradually realising there was an unbridgeable gap between us not only in the physical distance between us but also in our points of view.

“Dad, there’s a book I’d like you to read”, she said. “It’s about family relationships. I think it will help you see what is happening in a less personal way.”

“I don’t want to read a book, for God’s sake. I want to stop James from destroying his life and the lives of those around him.”

“I’ll send it to you, any way. I’ve got to go and take the girls to school. Talk to you soon.”

I put the receiver down and stood up to ease the ache that I always get in my back when I am seated too long at my desk. Walking from my work area across the living room to the apartment balcony, I stared out at the Kuala Lumpur city skyline and tried to clear my mind of the jumble of thoughts in it. Strangely, I found myself recalling the time when you and I were in Singapore and Catherine was about 18 months old. We were staying in an apartment building on Orchard Road, long before the construction boom that would make it the shopping Mecca of South-East Asia. As we were dining at a nearby Chinese restaurant at the end of a day during which you had been unusually quiet, you said unexpectedly: "I think I'm pregnant." You gave me a smile but I could see you were uncertain how I would react. I took your hand and kissed it. "That's great news," I said. "Catherine should have a brother or sister." Nine months later you gave birth to James in the Matilda Hospital in Hong Kong.

And here I am more than three decades later ready to cry with the misery I feel. Perhaps time should stop for us at the happiest moment of our lives. When I remember how radiant you were holding James's first child, Linda, I wonder if your death, less than two months later, came at the right moment for you. But right now I would give anything to have you with me because I know you would be able to help me gain the strength to deal with this new emotional strain in my life.

All my love,

John

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## Chapter Eight

A crowing rooster woke him. Light filtering through the heavy curtains of his bedroom told him it was dawn. He lay uncovered on the sheet, his T-shirt clammy with sweat against the small of his back and shoulders. Damned Tenaga, he muttered. The blackout had begun several hours earlier, in the middle of the night, cutting off the air-conditioning and interrupting his sleep, but the national electricity supplier had still not restored power. He looked at the clock on the table beside his bed. It was 6.35. If the air-conditioner had been running, he would not have heard the cock and would still be sleeping. He had not intended to get up until about 8 o'clock because it was Sunday. It had been raining heavily overnight and he guessed the power cut was caused by the flooding of the area sub-station. This had happened a number of times since he had moved to Kuala Lumpur but nothing had been done to rectify the problem. The sub-station was near the confluence of the Gombak and Klang rivers, which frequently overflowed and flooded the surrounding area during heavy rain.

Fancy apartment buildings, high-rise office blocks, elevated roads and a light rail transport system had given Kuala Lumpur the superficial appearance of a modern city but it still had the Third World problems that had existed when Scott first visited Malaysia some 40 years earlier. While the blight of slums, blackouts and interruptions to water supply could be blamed on the capital's rapid expansion, it was less easy for officials to explain their failure to devise a practical flood-prevention scheme in response to the tropical rainfall that was standard to Malaysia and the region. Singapore

had significantly reduced the impact of monsoonal downpours on the island republic's traffic and business life with an effective drainage system. But in Kuala Lumpur when the rains came on schedule they inevitably resulted in flooding, which caused extensive damage and brought the capital to a halt. Scott seldom left his apartment when there was a heavy rainfall because inevitably water spilling out of the Gombak and Klang rivers would cause horrendous traffic jams near the area where he lived.

The floods, like the cock's crow, reflected the uneven growth of Kuala Lumpur, where office workers in the top floors of the business centre's skyscrapers looked out over a city that comprised not only apartment complexes and shopping malls but also pockets of tropical vegetation marking the sites of small self-contained neighbourhoods or kampungs, more evocative of rural Malaysia than a national capital. These were relics of old Kuala Lumpur, the township that had grown up around the meeting point of the Gombak and Klang rivers. From the balcony of his apartment, Scott could see the centrepiece of today's Kuala Lumpur, the Petronas Twin Towers, which were the world's tallest buildings when they were completed. From time to time, he could also see monkeys waddling down the road below him, looking as much at home as they would in the jungle. Roosters, like the one that had woken him, frequently strayed into the garden of his apartment block with a clutch of hens from a nearby kampung.

He dozed for another half hour, then eased himself onto the floor, feeling old and creaky. How long ago was it, he wondered, when he used to bounce out of bed filled with enthusiasm to find out what the new day held for him. He pulled off his damp T-shirt, retied the cord of his pajama pants and after a visit to the toilet headed for the front door. The growing incidence of crime prompted him to put his eye to the peep-hole to make sure no stranger was lurking outside before opening the door and picking up the two Sunday newspapers dropped there by the caretaker.

For a moment he stood gaping at the banner headline on the front page of the Sunday Star, then retreated into his apartment, closing and locking the door behind him. He put the newspapers on the dining table and saw that both the Sunday Star and the New Sunday Times were featuring the same startling story.

Two men had appeared on Saturday in separate court hearings at which each pleaded guilty to a charge of committing an act of gross indecency. They were alleged to have allowed the former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim to sodomise them. The defendants were Sukma Damarwan, an Indonesian who had been adopted by Anwar's father, and Munawar Anees, a Pakistani with permanent resident status in Malaysia and the United States. Munawar had written speeches for Anwar and was the former editor of an Islamic journal published in Malaysia. They were both sentenced to six months imprisonment. It was an extraordinary development, highlighted by the provocative banner headlines of the two newspapers. "We were sodomised", blared the New Sunday Times over its lead story. The Sunday Star's article appeared under the words: "Two jailed for sodomy, They implicate Anwar in unnatural sexual acts". In conservative Malaysia, Scott had found, the media normally ignored the carnal nature of human relationships or if it was necessary to refer to a sexual act, did so with Victorian discretion. But on this occasion the leading newspapers adopted the blatant approach of Western tabloids, which they so often decried, publishing, probably for the first time in Malaysia, explicit descriptions of an act both illegal under Malaysian law and forbidden by Islam, the predominant religion. The New Sunday Times printed

every word of the charges, which in each case stated that the defendant had committed an act of gross indecency by letting Anwar “introduce his penis into your anus”.

The appearance in the newspaper of these words astonished Scott. He knew from his association with local journalists that such bluntness was, under normal circumstances, strictly prohibited. It could only have happened with the approval of both the editor and someone in a senior government position. Anwar had been a popular leader, with an image as a dutiful husband and father and a committed Muslim. Now, the press was saying this was a false picture of the man who had been expected to succeed Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister. Suddenly, there was a new dimension to his dismissal from cabinet and expulsion from UMNO. Did the sodomy cases foreshadow an official claim that Anwar’s downfall was due not to political differences but unacceptable personal behaviour? Anwar had been winning public sympathy as the loser in a power struggle but how would Muslims look at an accused sodomist? It seemed to Scott that the press coverage was aimed at convincing Malaysians that the man whom many of them had held in high esteem did not deserve their respect. When Siti had expressed her belief that Anwar could not be gay, the former deputy leader was only facing allegations and the question of his sexual inclinations was essentially academic. Now it had been presented in court as a fact that he had engaged in homosexual practices.

Scott’s first reaction to the new development was disbelief. Anwar was the last person in government he would associate with sodomy. That would mean he had to be homosexual or bisexual. However, he had always been presented as a staunch upholder of Malay Muslim values. He was a married man with six children whose wife always wore the tudung, the head covering of conservative Muslim women. From the time he had come to prominence as a young political activist, he had been seen as a follower of the stricter orthodox Islamic path.

Moreover, the court appearances of Sukma and Munawar, with their identical charges and outcome, conveyed a strong impression of behind-the-scenes orchestration. At a press conference following the court hearings, which the newspapers covered, Anwar said that the prosecution of Sukma and Munawar showed that there was a high-level conspiracy to destroy his political career by character assassination. As he ate a breakfast of poached egg, toast and tea, Scott weighed up the antithetical possibilities that either everything had been fabricated or there was an element of truth in the charges. He could not come to a firm conclusion.

At the meetings Anwar had been holding throughout the country, attacking the government and the Prime Minister, he said he had been unjustly sacked. He was due to speak at the National Mosque that afternoon and Scott decided he would attend the rally and hear what the former deputy prime minister had to say. After he had shaved, showered and dressed in slacks and a sport shirt he wrote a report on the court cases, accessed his newspaper through his computer and sent his story down the line. He also sent an email to the foreign desk telling them he would be filing either an update or separate item if the Anwar speech warranted it.

By the time he was finished, it was already past 1 o’clock. He made himself a cheese and tomato sandwich, ate half of it and put the rest in the refrigerator for later. Then he set out on foot for the National Mosque, which was about a 15-minute walk from his apartment block. He would normally have used his car, even though it was a short distance away, because of the heat at that

time of day but assumed, correctly as it turned out, that there would be a large public showing and the police would block off surrounding roads. Before he could even see the mosque he was caught up in a mass of people heading for the same destination.

Entering the grounds of the Muslims' main place of prayer in Kuala Lumpur, he pushed his way forward to join other journalists gathered below a balcony adorned with a banner bearing the word "Reformasi". He presumed the slogan, which Anwar had appropriated from Indonesian students rebelling against their country's president, marked the spot where the former deputy president would appear. It was stifling hot as he moved through the crowd, which numbered about 40,000, far exceeding his expectation and triggering the claustrophobia he habitually felt in such circumstances. But he wanted to know what people thought about the sodomy convictions implicating Anwar and, resisting the inclination to flee, he talked to several men and women as he made his way forward.

Their reactions were similar to his own initial feeling. One man said he did not believe Anwar had engaged in homosexual acts. He asked: "Why are the two men who are supposed to have been sodomised in court and not the person alleged to have sodomised them?" Then, as the crowd roared, Anwar walked out onto the balcony accompanied by his wife, Azizah Ismail. A young woman who was talking to Scott pointed to them and said Anwar could not be guilty of any of the sexual allegations because his wife was still at his side.

From the approving attitude of his audience, whom Anwar engaged with fiery rhetoric and acidic humour, they too simply could not accept that he could be involved in any of the illegal sexual activities linked to him. He was too good a man. A pillar of Islam and a man of the people. The background of the mosque served to underline his claim to unswerving piety.

While Anwar was still in full flight, Scott decided to head back home before the crowd broke up and created a crush of people all trying to move away from the mosque at the same time. After making his way slowly back to Jalan Raja Laut, he turned into a street running past the Selangor Club, which was the shortest route to his apartment, but was stopped by police. He showed his press pass and an officer said: "You'll have to wait outside. The Queen is already in the church."

Scott realised he had completely forgotten about the visit of Queen Elizabeth, who was in Malaysia to officiate at the closing of the Commonwealth Games. Incongruously, she was attending a service at St Mary's Anglican Church, which, like the Selangor Club had been a focal point of British community activity in colonial days, at the same time as Anwar was arousing Malay Muslims to a fever pitch of hostility towards the government, the judiciary and the police. The Christian church was situated next to the Selangor Club on one side of Dataran Merdeka - Freedom Square - while the mosque was a short distance away from the perimeter road on the other side. Scott imagined that if radical Muslims leaving the mosque encountered any members of the small group of Christians - mostly Chinese - attending the service, there could be trouble. But as he stood outside the church, the Queen emerged, giving her customary languid wave and departed with a large police escort. The congregation dispersed quickly and Scott continued his walk back home.

The government, he knew, would portray the Queen's visit - especially her attendance at the

church - as a sign that life in Malaysia was calm and normal. But it was far from that. The authorities had a serious problem on their hands. He had seen enough at the mosque to make him appreciate that the government would have a difficult, if impossible, task in convincing Malaysians that Anwar was a sodomist. Then, as he walked up the road that climbed to his apartment block, with sweat sliding down his body from his armpits, he became aware of a niggling thought in the back of his mind. How do you tell if someone is homosexual or bisexual if he or she does not wish you to know? In just a matter of days, his preconceived notions on the question had been shattered.

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## Chapter Nine

September 20, 1998

My Dearest Siu Mei,

Life plays grotesque tricks upon us. Now, I find myself immersed in a remarkable political development involving the former deputy prime minister, who is alleged to have had sexual relations with two other men. As I wrestle with our daughter's apparent acceptance that her brother is gay and my own reaction of incredulity, I am confronted with graphic descriptions of the physical act that two men engage in. As a journalist, I am detached; as a father, I am shaken.

It is strange isn't it that I should react in this way, after being exposed to the most unusual manifestations of human behaviour in the course of my career. As a young reporter assigned to cover the courts and dash to where crimes had been committed, I quickly learned that my community was not as straight-laced and law abiding as it appeared to be. The statutes were broader in their reach in those days and the prosecution of homosexuals and prostitutes took up much of the courts' time. But there were also cases featuring more exotic endeavours, which strained my imagination. I took it upon myself to be a dispassionate observer of my fellow beings in order to report events with objectivity, which was our credo back then.

Most of the police officers and court officials I dealt with in Auckland regarded the "homos", or "queers" as society's misfits and extended them neither compassion nor consideration. I did not see myself as a member of this rough-edged group. But I remember laughing with the men on duty at police headquarters one night when two detectives said they had "pitched a couple of queers into the sea" off Mission Bay. The next day, when I heard the Marine Police had recovered the body of a man from the harbour I felt sick and wondered if he was one of the homosexuals. But I did not follow up this possibility. A coroner subsequently found that the man, who was identified by a brother, had drowned but was unable to determine how he came to be in the harbour. I did not ask any questions about the matter at police headquarters and no one volunteered any information that might link the detectives' action to the man's death.

I never gave much thought to why some men were homosexuals. At some stage when I was an adolescent experiencing the changes in my body that produced sudden erections and was also

acquiring an extremely vague idea of what this aroused member might be used for from the section on reproduction in an encyclopedia in an aunt's house, I also discovered from conversations with classmates that some boys oddly did not like girls. They were fairies. Somehow, my friend Luke and I knew instinctively that our classmate Gregory was a fairy. But we did not hold it against him and he never made any approach to either of us that supported our opinion. He was a good pianist and I have never forgotten how beautifully he played Debussy's Clair de Lune, which I heard for the first time in his house while his mother served me and Luke tea and cakes.

The first adult homosexual I met was the owner of a second-hand book shop in Newmarket, an Auckland suburb not far from my home. He was a small man with a shiny face, which looked as if it had been polished with oil, and sleek black hair. He used to stand just inside the entrance to his store watching the Auckland Grammar School students who stopped in Newmarket for milkshakes or Eskimo Pies on their way home. It was Graham, who was in our sixth form class, who pointed him out to Luke and me and told us he was a "queer", a fairy.

"How do you know," I asked.

"He called me into his shop one day and asked me what kind of books I liked to read. I said murder mysteries and he told me he had some in the back of the shop. Then he opened a bottle of beer and poured a glass for me. When I had finished it he put his arm around me and said he would give me ten shillings if I let him touch me."

"Where?" Luke asked.

"On my dick, of course."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Just for a moment. Then I took the half-quid and left." He grinned. "Do you want to come with me this arvo. We could drink some of his beer."

"I wouldn't let him touch me," I said.

"You don't have to. You can just drink his beer."

After school, the three of them walked down the hill to Newmarket. The bookstore owner recognised Graham and gave him a big smile.

"I brought some friends," Graham said.

"Good, good. Come in. Would you like some beer?"

We nodded and followed him into the back of the shop. I was uneasy, wondering if he would try to put his arm around me. But he just sat in a chair and watched us as we drank his beer. When my glass was empty I put it down and said I had to go, adding, to emphasise my sexual preference, that I wanted to see if any girls from Epsom Grammar were in the milk bar. It was not entirely a

concoction. I had developed a crush on a girl I had seen at a combined grammar schools choir performance and was hoping to see her again in Newmarket, which was a popular hangout for students from both schools.

“I’ll come with you,” Luke said. “What about you, Graham?”

“No. I’ll stay a little while longer. I haven’t finished my beer.” He gave me a wink that told me he was willing to let himself be touched for another ten shillings.

By the time I was in my twenties, I had run into homosexual men in all walks of life. In Canberra and Melbourne, where I worked with theatre groups, in addition to my daily job as a journalist, many of my fellow actors were gay. I accepted them for what they were but regarded them as members of an alien culture, a disparate and baffling offshoot of conventional society.

One night in Melbourne at an end-of-show cast party in the leading actor’s home, I stayed on drinking after a girl I had hoped to take home was picked up by her father. The host finally said he was going to bed and invited the rest of us to crash on a couch or the floor if we wanted to join him for breakfast. I decided I was too drunk to drive home and found a bunk in a spare room. I was woken up by a young actor named Melville putting his arms around me. He was lying next to me wearing only undershorts.

“Fuck off, you disgusting bastard,” I shouted and pushed him off the couch with a knee. He got up from the floor and walked away without a word. We both had parts in the theatre group’s next play but the incident did not affect my relationship with him as a fellow actor because I distinguished between his sexual proclivity and his theatrical talent and, at the same time, was reasonably certain that he would not make such an approach again. He never did and went on to become a leading figure in television dramas.

Homosexual - and trans-sexual - behaviour was blatant in parts of Asia where legal and religious proscriptions were undermined by lax enforcement. Soft-faced men dressed as women aggressively sold themselves on the streets to passing pedestrians, especially foreigners. This blurring of the differences between men and women irritated me when, during my Indonesian posting for Reuters, I decided to take home one of the young female prostitutes offering themselves along the main canal running through Jakarta. I did not want to end up in bed with a boy and examined my choice closely to assure myself she was a girl before arranging for her to come with me.

I often wondered if my dour Singapore-based Reuter boss, Gordon Holmes, a supercilious product of the English public school system, picked up young boys from the same streets that I went to looking for girls when he visited Jakarta to negotiate the sale of the news service to Indonesian publishers. In striking contrast with his troops, Holmes showed no interest in women and I and my colleagues had decided that his effeminate Chinese secretary, Charles Ong, was also his boy friend. Holmes’ chief entertainment was going to films in the company of other males. On quiet news days, when the overnight watch could be left to local staff, he would stride into the newsroom from his office as the three expatriate correspondents were planning an evening in the bars or dance halls and peremptorily call on all of them to “come along” with him to one of

Singapore's movie theatres. On my visits to Singapore, I regularly ignored the summons, having no desire to spend my evening in the company of the boring bureau chief when I could be rolling in bed with the beautiful Eurasian woman I had met at the bar of the Cockpit Hotel. Rose Lee had been the mistress of the third most important British official in Singapore for ten years. Before he returned to England, she had extracted from him a house and enough money to survive on for the rest of her life and so could indulge herself with a poorly-paid but young and sexually vigorous Australian journalist.

So, with what I had learned or experienced during my career as a journalist, I was hardly an innocent abroad when it came to the subject of sexual orientations. But nothing that I had seen or experienced prepared me for the shock of being told that our son was gay. He did not fall into any of the categories of homosexuality with which I was acquainted. He was married with three children, for God's sake. But now I find myself contemplating the charge against the Malaysian leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is also married and the father of six children, and confronting the fact that, whether or not this man is guilty of the allegations against him, bisexuality is a fact of life. I suppose I had never applied myself to thinking about homosexual behaviour because it was something that repelled me but now I have been forced to give close heed to exactly what it means in the physical sense through my role as a reporter covering the Anwar affair.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that James is bisexual. I am sure he is going through some kind of mid-life crisis that has caused him to convince himself that he is gay.

Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the opinion of Catherine. Following my telephone conversation with her, she sent me an email which seemed to be aimed at getting me to accept James's conversion without challenge. She disclosed that she had known of James's intention for more than a year. I wonder how long the conspiracy of silence would have gone on if Hannah had not blurted out to me that James was gay.

Catherine said there was "no going back" and she hoped "people" - like me, I suppose - did not forget that James was "the same person in most respects", adding: "And he needs our help and support now more than ever in his life."

The email included a footnote from Alan, who said: "We are all devastated about what James and his family are going through. It has taken me much time to accept what is happening and I am only his brother-in-law."

He went on: "I don't have any problem with the concept of homosexuality. I have a number of great gay friends. But I do worry about AIDS and relate to Erika's fears regarding the children."

He said the timing of James's "discovery", as he called it, was "appalling for baby Paul" and expressed the hope that his brother-in-law and Erika could remain friends long enough for "this child to be given a fair chance in life".

"James loves his children, he is an extremely caring father," he said. "The realisation of his gay self is tearing him apart and he should not be left to face himself and the consequences of his action alone."

He also said that while he might not approve of James's choice he wondered whether he really had a choice. To me this was a defeatist attitude. In my reply, I said it seemed they were both rather sanguine about the situation, seeing it as a fait accompli.

"Homosexuality," I told them, "is an aberrant behaviour. Any suggestion that it is merely an alternative lifestyle should be strongly rejected."

Because it was an aberration, it should not be encouraged. "If James is teetering, which he appears to be doing, every effort should be made to discourage him from falling into the pit. To indicate to him, that, 'Hey if you join the gay community, that's fine by us,' would be a disastrous mistake."

Responding to Alan's remark that he had gay friends, I said: "We all know gay men and women who are not ogres. But that's beside the point. They do not accept the sexual mores of the vast majority of society. From this starting point, the ramifications are disturbing."

"I find repugnant the proposal by some homosexuals that they should be allowed to adopt and raise children. (Or in the case of lesbians be artificially inseminated.) Children have enough problems growing up without having the added confusion of such sexual disorientation. I hope you will keep this in mind in whatever counsel you give James."

I don't think they will listen to me, Siu Mei. In the event that Catherine and her husband are unwilling to help me I will have to find a way by myself to bring James to his senses.

All my love,

John

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## Chapter Ten

The Prime Minister looked unusually solemn as he walked into the conference room where a large group of local and foreign journalists had assembled for his first public announcement following the detention of Anwar. The former deputy prime minister had been arrested at his home by masked police under the Internal Security Act a few hours after his fiery speech at the National Mosque, which had provoked supporters into vandalising UMNO headquarters. A young woman from the Philippines, who worked for CNN, leaned over to Scott and whispered: "He looks as if he's going to announce Anwar's execution."

The Malaysian leader did not go that far but his judgment and conviction of Anwar, before he had been charged with any crime, foreshadowed a loss of freedom for the man he had chosen to succeed him, which would cut short his political career as finally as if he had lost his life. There was none of the usual Prime Ministerial banter. He opened the press conference by denouncing Anwar as a rabble-rouser who wanted to instigate violence. After stating that his former deputy

was arrested under the ISA because he sought to create the kind of situation existing in Indonesia, where people rioted daily, he made it plain that Anwar would be appearing in court to face charges arising from the sexual allegations against him. He said that for years he had dismissed the accusation against Anwar, believing they were made “out of sheer jealousy for the man who was going to be the leader of the party”. But he had concluded that they were true after personally interviewing “the people he sodomised, the women he had sex with”. Television cameras recorded most of what he said for transmission to viewers that evening. For Scott, it was another surprising departure from the moral conservatism of Malaysia. Not only was Dr Mahathir expressing himself frankly for publication on an area of human behaviour scrupulously avoided by the media before the Anwar affair but he was also allowing the press conference to be broadcast to the public at a prime viewing time.

Referring to the two men who had pleaded guilty to being sodomised by Anwar three days earlier, he said his deputy did not expect that his adopted brother and his friend would come out in the open and make their statements. The Prime Minister said they did this because it was pointed out to them that, as Muslims, they had committed a great sin, which was punishable in the after life. Dismissing Anwar’s statement that he would swear his innocence on the Koran in a mosque, he said Anwar had for years been masquerading as a religious person and “yet had been committing these things, not today, not yesterday but for years”. He was a man who appeared to be religious but in fact was not and was “quite capable of swearing in a mosque, knowing full well that what he was swearing was not the absolute truth”.

Then, in an emotional outburst, Dr Mahathir lamented the collapse of his plans to make Anwar his successor. He said he had taken him into the government and helped him overtake many people who were veterans until he was all set to become the next prime minister. But he had discovered that his deputy was guilty of something that he could not forgive and Malaysians, whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims, could not accept. The Prime Minister said he had to act against the person he had regarded as a friend, a colleague and his protégé because a sodomist could not be allowed to become a leader of Malaysia.

Scott suspected the Prime Minister’s outrage was sparked more by Anwar’s attempt to seize power from his mentor than the “sinful” sexual activities in which he was now said to have engaged. Anwar had been an Islamic radical and anti-government student agitator, who had been detained for two years under the Internal Security Act, before Dr Mahathir persuaded him to join UMNO. It was seen as a political coup that turned an activist, who had a strong following among the country’s youth and an expected future in the opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia, into an establishment stalwart. He moved rapidly up through the government ranks, eventually becoming Deputy Prime Minister and deputy president of UMNO. If he had shown patience, Anwar, in due course, would have succeeded the Prime Minister, who anointed him as his successor. But he believed, incorrectly, that he could build up enough popular and political pressure to force the Prime Minister into early retirement. Scott surmised that after this display of disloyalty by the man he had groomed to lead the nation, Dr Mahathir had seen the sexual allegations against Anwar, which he had previously dismissed, in a different light.

Nevertheless, he experienced a tinge of sympathy for the Prime Minister. The leader’s remarks, reflecting his one-time close relationship with his former deputy, were like those of a father who

has been deceived by his son. Scott was moved to reflect on his own strained family ties. And when Dr Mahathir set out to show Anwar's "depravity", Scott empathised with his apparent revulsion. Almost choking on the words, the Prime Minister said that while sodomising Munawar, Anwar had also masturbated him. Declaring that this was what Munawar told the police, he said he could "not understand how a man would invent a story like that". He added: "The act was despicable. And this is a man who talks about other people being despicable."

"I just heard that Munawar has retracted his confession to the police," the CNN reporter whispered.

"Really?" Scott said, deciding that he would have to check out her information. But he could not shake off the nauseating impact of the Prime Minister's words.

He had a story to write - focusing on the remarkable evolution of the Anwar affair to the point where once taboo sexual matters were being public aired - but his mind was on the problems in his own life. They were affecting him so severely that, for the first time since he had returned to Asia to resume his career as a foreign correspondent, he was losing his zest for his job.

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## Chapter Eleven

September 22, 1998

My dearest Siu Mei,

I seem to have lost control of my emotions. Your death let loose in me a plethora of feelings I had never experienced before but eventually I managed to rein them in. Now one of the most dominant then, anger - that ugly human response to stressful events - is enveloping me again. The more I think about homosexuality, a subject which I have had repeatedly thrust into my consciousness lately, the angrier I become over James's astonishing abandonment of his family and his heterosexual existence for a way of life that I regard as sordid and unnatural. This has prompted me to strongly criticise his action in a letter, which is now causing me some unease. But it is too late for editing. In the past, if I had written a letter in response to something that had stirred me up emotionally, I would sit on it for a day before I posted it. But with the advent of the Internet, I have been sucked into the new world of instant communication and fire off my missives at the moment of completion without regard for the damage they might do.

"At this time of the year, as the birthday of each member of the family falls in a monthly sequence, beginning with your mother in July, Catherine in August, me in September and you in October," my letter said, "I have often in the past reflected on my good fortune in having married Siu Mei and been blessed with a fine son and daughter. Your mother and I were proud of our children and their achievements. We saw in them a strong work ethic, a respect for tradition and a commitment to the moral standards and values of civilised society, in which we believed. Birthdays were, therefore, a cause for celebration. But this year, on your birthday, I will have nothing to celebrate.

“From the time of Siu Mei’s death until recently, I wished daily that she was still alive. But in the past few days, I have almost come to believe that it is better that she died when she did - with only good and happy recollections of her second son. With her strong sense of family and essential goodness, she would have been devastated by what has happened. I have even thought that it might have been preferable for me to have joined her in death at that time than to have lived long enough to know what I know now.

“Back then, in my mind there were only warm recollections of my son - the small boy splashing about in the children’s pool at the Country Club in Hong Kong; the young lad in his Glenealy uniform giving me a shy smile as I picked him up from school; the teenager who wanted to be a professional basketball player but was persuaded to choose a more conventional career path and the young man who was so excited at getting a job as a copywriter in an ad agency that he picked his mother up in his arms and swung her around in the air. And now? There is a dark shadow in my mind, dulling the happiness of those memories.

“Hannah said Erika found a diary detailing your relationship with a ‘boyfriend’ and you later lied about your travel schedule to spend a weekend with him, denying your children time you should have spent with them. You apparently also misled Erika about this relationship, suggesting falsely that it was over. I felt a deep sense of shame on hearing that my son had resorted to lies and deceit. More alarming to me was the risk you may have posed to your wife, given the spread of AIDS through the gay community. I have been at fault, it seems, in not doing more to imbue you with a sense of honesty and virtue, two of the most important values in civilised society.

“In your pursuit of a hedonistic life, you have shown an appalling lack of concern for the welfare of your wife and children and a contempt for the values which your mother and I sought to inculcate in you. You have been grossly self-indulgent.

“I suspect you are searching for your personal holy grail, something that will always elude you. You may find temporary pleasure among the people with whom you have chosen to associate but in time you will come to realise that you have made a terrible, tragic mistake. You will see how much you once had and have irretrievably lost. It is my fervent wish that this realisation dawns upon you soon and that I will be able to see you rebuild your life with a commitment to self-discipline, hard work and the moral values that distinguish civilised men and women from savages.”

I could not bring myself to sign it, as I always had in the past, “Love, Dad.” Instead, I wrote coldly: “Your father.”

When, some time after sending off the letter, I went back to the computer and re-read it, I was struck by its pomposity and wondered how I had become so enraged and so brutal towards my son. I have lost control not only over my emotions but also my sense of direction. I long to be able to turn to you for support but since you are not now by my side I must struggle on my own to determine a rational course of action for myself in the present circumstances.

All my love,  
John

