

Letters To My Late Wife

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

October 1, 1998

My Dearest Siu Mei,

It is James's birthday tomorrow. I remember clearly the day he was born in the Matilda Hospital in Hong Kong, the second of our children to come into the world high up on Victoria Peak. The nurses shooed me out of the labour room about one o'clock in the morning when it became clear it was going to be a long and difficult birth, saying they would call me back when delivery was closer. I walked out into the cool night air, which was flecked with patches of mist, thinking that Edwardian-era expatriates with money to pay for private hospital care must have been delighted with the opening of the Matilda back at the beginning of the twentieth century. Named after the wife of the governor, it provided not only the most modern medical facilities of the time but also an escape from the enervating heat of sea-level areas of the British colony.

Far below me reflections of electric signs on the office blocks of Victoria's central business district spilled out into the harbour, forming, together with kaleidoscopic patterns cast on the water by ship and ferry illuminations, a rainbow strip bridging the island with the brightly-lit, mainland beachhead at Kowloon. Strolling through the grounds to the south side of the main hospital building I looked down on Aberdeen, where the glow of kerosene lamps on fishing junks moored side-by-side in a tight formation for the night marked the shoreline like the beacons of a highway. Out in the channel, three floating restaurants still beckoned tourists with their strings of coloured bulbs, although the last diners would have been taken back to the shore by sampan hours earlier. I was exhilarated by the beauty of Hong Kong after dark, when the squalor of back streets and the homes made from packing cases and plastic sheets on hillside squatter areas was hidden, and by the fact that I was about to become a father again.

After a lengthy labour, the birth of our second child came suddenly about 5 a.m. I had fallen asleep in a chair by the reception counter and by the time a nurse had woken me and taken me to the delivery room I was just in time to see Dr Zimmer hold up the baby and proclaim that it was a boy. You were pale and drained of energy but you managed a smile and whispered to me: "Now, with a boy and girl, we have a perfect little family all our own." I thought, yes, this was what I always wanted and kissed you as you fell asleep.

Over the years we watched our daughter and son grow from babies to children and then to young adults with pride and delight, making each birthday a special family occasion. I tried to maintain that tradition after your death and during the years I have been back in Asia I have usually telephoned James or at least sent him an email on the second of October to convey my best wishes. But from now on it will be just another day in the year.

Fortunately, I am busy with the Anwar case. As the first of two trials approaches, his supporters

have become increasingly active in confronting the authorities with street demonstrations to demand his release. Their protests have brought a tough response from police riot squads, which have used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the angry crowds. I have watched these clashes at close hand and reported on the rough handling by police of people arrested, many of them students. However, while I have been working hard, following the action in the streets and spending hours at my computer, a part of my mind has remained in a state of agitation over my confrontation with our son and daughter.

Now, my eye alights on anything I see in the press or on the Internet related to homosexuality. Malaysia's New Straits Times carried an article about an American psychoanalyst who asserted homosexuals suffered from an illness, which could be "cured". He argued that it was a "neurotic adaptation" that could be traced to "smothering mothers and abdicating fathers". Recently, his son, to whom he had dedicated one of his books, declared that he was gay.

"I ask myself, "Did I fail my son?" the father said in an interview.

I have wondered the same thing and can imagine his shock at finding out that his son was gay. Struggling to come to terms with James's case, I at first found myself leaning towards his theory that homosexuality was an illness. But there was a certain flakiness in his reasoning and the newspaper reported that the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders 22 years ago. I have no idea why some people are gay. But I continue to hold to the opinion that James has convinced himself that he is homosexual as a way of dealing with the stress he has been under.

My friend Yusuf has joined Catherine in accusing me of homophobia. I am certainly not in the same category as members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy who denounce homosexuality as evil (while, hypocritically, failing to take action against the sexual abuse committed by priests). I am tolerant enough to accept homosexual behaviour between consenting males and females. But this acceptance does not extend to my son whom I believe has mistakenly convinced himself that he is gay in order to bring about change in a life which he sees as burdened by marriage and financial difficulties. The fact that he is taking a new name - your family name - is to me confirmation that he wants to bury his old life.

Meanwhile, I am finding myself increasingly isolated from both our immediate and extended family in my response to James's action. Your favourite niece, Elly, who I last saw when I visited Indonesia three years ago and who keeps in touch with our son and daughter, called me from her home in Jakarta and accused me of having no compassion for James. She had been talking to Catherine in London and asked me to be more sympathetic towards what she called our son's long struggle to find his true self.

"When we were kids Catherine and James said you were always very strict," Elly said. "You set high standards which they were unable to meet. You're a perfectionist. You should realise that not everyone can be like you or like you want them to be. Most people are only human with very human imperfections. But you judge everyone on the basis of what you think is right or wrong. Since you are never wrong - in your eyes - you have no sympathy for anyone who is less than perfect according to your values. Your children seem to think you have led a blameless life. I don't

believe it is possible to say that about anyone. You should subject yourself to a deep examination and question whether you have the right to be the judge of your son's actions.”

She suggested that you would be less judgemental. I told her that in my opinion your reaction would have been the same as mine. She disagreed. I'm afraid I was brusque with your eldest brother's daughter and our conversation ended in barely civil goodbyes.

Elly attacked me for having no compassion for James. But nobody, it seems, has any compassion for me. I wish I was not so distressed about what has happened and could put it behind me. But while I have tried to persuade myself that it is a situation over which I have no control, I remain desolate. Yusuf said I was feeling sorry for myself. I don't think that is true. If I feel sorry for anyone it is James's wife and children.

With his announcement that he is changing his name, James seems to be closing the door to any reconciliation between us. I have explained my position to him. It is up to him to show some regard for how I feel and make a move to reestablish contact with me. However, if he does not change his stance and persists in arguing that he is gay, there is probably no point in us resuming our dialogue.

Am I right, Siu Mei? I was surprised by the reaction of Yusuf to my revelation that James was gay. I expected support from that quarter at least. I think I will have to focus myself on my work, as I did following your death, and hope that some time in the future our family will find its way back to a degree of normality.

All my love,

John

Chapter Twenty-Five

Scott was finding it hard to concentrate on what the new governor of Bank Negara was saying. He slid forward on his throne-sized chair to get closer to the immense table around which more than a dozen other journalists and a phalanx of bank officials were seated and began to record key sentences onto the note pad supplied by the bank. As he effortlessly rendered the words in the loops, semi-circles and straight lines of the Pitman's shorthand he had been taught nearly a half-century earlier, he grumbled to himself, as he always did, at the impracticality of a table topped with red leather. The board room was replete with red leather. It was wrapped around pillars, covering chairs and adorning windows and the ceiling. The aim appeared to be to give the national financial institution an Old World dignity but in Scott's estimation it had ended up looking tacky. Some contractor with a good friend in Treasury had no doubt made a bundle out of the project.

The others present were giving their full attention to the speaker. Scott knew it was important to report for the business pages of his newspaper the shifts in economic policy that the head of the

Malaysian central bank was announcing, following the encouraged departure of the man he had replaced. The latter had been implementing policies favoured by Anwar Ibrahim, who was finance minister as well as deputy prime minister before his sacking. But as the governor's voice droned on Scott had increasing difficulty in digesting the message. His mind did not want to wrestle with the statistics being put before him.

He had a sense that there was an issue he ought to be confronting but preferred to leave in the back of his mind. That was odd because he normally tackled difficult questions head on. It was somehow linked to the remarks made by Elly but every time he recalled the essence of his conversation with her, he became so angry that he had to find something else to think about. But it was becoming harder to ignore the conflicting inclinations in his head. He tried to focus on the bank governor's analysis of the economic situation and his plans for change.

"I don't want to be judgemental about the policies of my predecessor," he was saying. "Different situations call for different policies. And we are facing an entirely different situation now both in Malaysia and throughout the region."

That was it, Scott thought. Elly had urged him to question whether he had the right to be the judge of James's actions. She had also said that Catherine and James seemed to think he had led a blameless life but she did not believe it was possible to say that about anyone.

It had stung him at the time - because her implication that he had not led a blameless life had struck a chord. It had reminded him that he had not been entirely honest with James when he had talked to him about the temptations of travelling in Asia. At that time, thinking that the looming marriage breakup may have been caused by his son's lust for another woman, he told James that when he and his sister were little, he just had to look at them asleep in their beds at night to remind him of the importance of keeping the family together. That was true, but the implication behind his statement that he had never strayed was not. And so by Elly's definition, as someone who had not been as faultless as he led his children to believe, had he not forfeited his right to be judgemental about his son?

He wondered what had happened to June. She had not maintained contact with him after she left Hong Kong and moved back to the United States and he had made no effort to keep in touch with her. But now, as soon as he pictured her, he recalled the erotic impact she had on him the first time she walked into the Foreign Correspondents' Club with a friend from the American bank where she worked as head of corporate relations. She was 33 but could have passed for the prettiest member of the cheerleading squad of a high school football team in her home country. She was blonde and vivacious and completely different from Scott's usual taste in the opposite sex. Besides, she was American and his previous experience of women born in the USA had led him to categorise them generally as loud and aggressive. But June spoke softly and had a smile that quickly altered his perspective on American females.

They were introduced by the bank friend, who was a member of the club, and Scott fetched a form from the office so she could apply to join, if she wished. She immediately filled it in and Scott put his name down as proposer while the friend seconded her application. It was the beginning of a friendship that developed as they met at club events and Hong Kong social

functions, which were a regular feature of the expatriate lifestyle. June and his wife got on well together and occasionally shared lunch or went on a shopping expedition.

Sometimes Scott would run into June when he went to the club for a drink before going home. She always greeted him affectionately with a kiss on the cheek and touched his arm possessively as they talked. She read airmailed copies of The Washington Post at the bank and if the newspaper contained one of his articles, she would discuss the content intelligently with him. Often she would praise his analysis of Chinese politics effusively, which pleased him because no one else commented on his articles. While listening to her at the bar, he would frequently start fantasising about going home with her, undressing her and having sex with her. As soon as these images started appearing in his mind, he would force himself to interrupt them by making a cordial remark to the Shanghainese barman, asking June a question about the bank's growth plans or waving absently to a colleague seated nearby, as if he had just noticed he was there.

He never got to the point of considering possible ploys he might use to turn his fantasy into reality or hinting at his craving for June. The expatriate community in Hong Kong was too small for an out-of-bounds affair to go unnoticed and he had seen how gossip, even when it was false, could send a husband or wife scurrying off to a divorce lawyer. So with his strong commitment to the preservation of his marriage, he kept his carnal thoughts to himself. However, June treated him with an increasing intimacy that made him think she knew he was sexually attracted to her. She would stop by his office, which was in the same building as the club, in the mid-afternoon, say he was working too hard and insist he take a coffee break with her. Seated opposite him in the club dining room, she would lean forward and gaze at him with eyes that seemed to promise him anything he wanted at the same time as she was telling him how much she admired his journalism. He did not discourage her from flirting with him. He enjoyed being the object of admiration of an alluring young woman at whom most of the other men in the room were casting lascivious glances and saw no harm in having his ego stroked.

Then, one night towards the end of a club dinner party for visiting American editors, June overheard Scott agree to take home his wife, who had said she was tired, before checking if there were any stories out of China that needed to be filed. Since there was a 12 hour time difference between Hong Kong and Washington, he regularly went to the office around midnight to read the Reuter teleprinter, which carried reports from the Chinese Hsinhua news agency, and see if his newspaper had sent him any messages through Cable & Wireless. As his wife was saying goodnight to the club president, June took Scott's arm and whispered in an ear.

"I'm leaving too. Come to my apartment after you drop off Siu Mei. I'll be waiting for you."

She did not wait for an answer and Scott had no time to reply before his wife was calling to him, "Let's go."

On the drive to their apartment, he listened to his wife's recital of her plans for the next day and agreed to pick up the children from school. In the back of his mind, as he discussed with her these everyday affairs of family life, was the titillating and dangerous recognition that if he chose not to go to the office he could, within a few minutes, be lying in the arms of the beautiful, blonde American woman who had been the subject of sexual fantasies since he met her.

“Will you be long?” Siu Mei asked as she slid out of the car.

“I hope not.”

“You can wake me, if you like,” she said.

“Okay.”

She was almost always asleep when he got home from making a late visit to his office but never complained if he roused her because he wanted to make love to her.

As he drove back down the driveway of the apartment complex he did not deliberately make a decision about the choice facing him. His libidinous impulses simply overrode any rational assessment of the situation. Instead of turning right to go to town, he turned left into Bowen Road where June had her apartment. He knew where it was because he and his wife had gone there as guests on two occasions when she had hosted a dinner for bank colleagues and club friends.

June had apparently not doubted he would come, opening the door within seconds after he had pressed the button that activated a buzzer. She had changed into a diaphanous slip and was bare-footed. Pushing the door closed, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Oh, God, I’ve wanted you for so long,” she said. Then she took his hand and led him into her bedroom, where she undressed him, tearing loose one of his shirt buttons in her feverish haste. When he was naked, she pulled off her slip and lay down on the bed. Scott climbed astride her but his penis was limp.

She took hold of it but her rubbing had no effect.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is it my breasts?”

She was flat-breasted but Scott had scarcely noticed.

He shook his head. “No. I probably drank too much.”

But he had been distracted from the desire he had felt in the car by his first sight of her nude body, which seemed so pale as to be uninviting to him. Her blondness was enhanced by her flaxen pubic hair. Since he had been working in Asia he had slept only with Asian women with dark eyes and with raven hair on their heads and between their legs. And his only sexual companion for the past several years had been his Chinese wife, whose familiar look, touch and smell caused him instant arousal when they kissed.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Just hold me,” she told him.

He lay down beside and held her, feeling nothing, while she told him she was in love with him and

they must meet again. She was certain they would be able to make love the next time.

After an hour, he said he had to go before his wife woke up and telephoned the office to ask when he was coming home. She reluctantly agreed and said she would call him the next day to arrange a time for him to come back to her flat.

But when she called him at his office, he said he said it would be better if he did not see her alone again. He felt bad about being unfaithful to Siu Mei. It was vital for him that he retained the love of his wife and kept his family together.

June pleaded with him to change his mind. When he was adamant, she became angry and said he had promised he would see her. She blasted him for being weak. She said she had believed he was a real man but she had been wrong. He said goodbye and hung up.

She called him daily for two weeks, sometimes crying and sometimes railing angrily at him. Finally, she conceded defeat and asked if they could remain friends. He said that was okay and within a few days she had invited Siu Mei out to lunch. To his relief she never gave a hint to his wife of his night of infidelity.

He had asked himself later, without being sure of the answer, whether their affair would have continued if he had successfully made love to June. His embarrassment over his impotence combined with his guilt at deceiving his wife brought him quickly to a decision to end it. Now, the last thing he wanted to consider was the possibility of what might have been.

As he recalled the episode, he had to admit that Elly had been right in doubting that his conduct had always been irreproachable. But did this make him unfit to judge James's behaviour? Remorse returned with the memory of his lapse - aggravated by the fact he could not even seek forgiveness now Siu Mei was dead - and he transmuted it into renewed anger towards his son. He told himself his short-lived transgression, which had caused no hurt to his wife or family, could not be compared with the outrageous actions of his son in leaving his wife, causing God-knows what damage to his children, and choosing to live his life as a homosexual.

The break in relations with his son now seemed irreparable. James was clearly determined not to waver in his decision to give up a normal, healthy existence and plunge himself into the fringe world of gays and lesbians. What would become of him? Scott pondered sadly.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tape-recorded and transcribed October 2, 1999

M. Happy birthday. It didn't register with me that today was your birthday until I looked at your file a moment ago. Otherwise, I would have offered you the opportunity to cancel today's session.

J. It's just another day. There's some nostalgia, of course. It used to be a big deal. But now nobody's going to bake me a birthday cake and I'll be lucky if Erika remembers to remind the children to call me. They didn't call this morning. And there's been no communication between me and my father for a year.

M. And we haven't talked for a year.

J. No. I've been trying to get my head together on my own. It's been a rough time. And it isn't getting any easier. So I concluded it was time to empty my mind bank again.

M. The last time we talked you said you had gone back to Erika. What has happened since then?

J. At first, things weren't too bad. We both tried to carry on as if it was a normal marriage. We argued about money. But that was nothing new. Things were tight because of a bad investment and that made us edgy with each other. However, we both pretended for a while that the sexual thing wasn't important.

I was experiencing conflicting emotions. At one point I convinced myself that it wasn't too big an issue for me to resolve. I told myself that my priority was to be at home with my children. So I really just had to put this gay thing on the shelf. Of course, this was naive because I was not addressing the situation, not even trying to work my way through it. Erika had taken the position that she would accept me as having these desires as long as I did not act upon them. And I think there was a time when I was certain I could do that. So I went along with the idea. Okay then, just let me be myself - be gay and mix with gay people. And I won't get into bed with a man again.

M. You really considered you could continue on that basis?

J. Yes. But, of course, I was wrong. On my own, I sought counselling at the Gay Married Men's Association, GAMMA. They said to me gay married men who leave their wives fall into two categories: those who go and never return; and those who make the break but go back home and finally depart a second time, which is usually final. That was generally the pattern. And I found myself falling into the second category.

M. What brought you to that conclusion?

J. When I went back I was really determined to stay and I was helped initially by the distractions of increasing responsibilities at the ad agency and my commitment to keeping the family together. But, really, what this was all about was not facing up to the sexuality business. I told myself, first, I needed to be home with my family, they were more important than anything else, and secondly, with the expectation that if I performed well I could expect a senior position, I should really be concentrating on my work and not wasting time. I came to the conviction that with these distractions I could shelve the real question.

Wrong again. Due to the increasing pressures at the agency I found it impossible to bottle up everything inside. My mind was skidding all over the place and the old sexual thoughts started going through my head again. Naturally, it affected how I performed at the office. But I still think I

would have got the promotion if the senior creative director who hates my guts because I'm half Chinese hadn't screwed me up with a dirty report, claiming the tie-up with the Singapore agency wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been there to undo the damage I allegedly caused.

Then, after I was passed over for promotion I made an even more intense effort to control my suppressed desires. I think that having convinced myself I was going to move up in the agency and having worked hard to achieve this goal and, then, having seen the dream evaporate, I needed to find something tangible to hold on to. The only reality for me then was my family. I decided that sticking with my wife and children was the way to get me through the depressing aftermath of this personal failure. I thought that the family would provide the stability I needed. Accordingly, I immersed myself more deeply in the daily activities of my wife and children and relegated the whole sexuality thing to a minor place in the scheme of things. The chief executive indicated to me that he believed if I "learned from my Singapore mistakes" there was a bright future for me in the agency so I decided to apply myself even more conscientiously to my work while trying to sort out my life.

For the past 12 months I've been reminding myself repeatedly of the chief executive's belief in my bright future and the need to focus on trying to fulfil his faith in me at the expense of everything else. That meant I must hold in check any emotional or sexual issues that might distract me from giving total commitment to serving my clients. But two months ago I was jolted out of my attempted detachment when my younger daughter, Sarah, fell ill. It crept up on us. We didn't realise what was happening. I blame myself for not paying more attention to clear signs that she was not well. But her doctor said it wouldn't have made any difference if her condition had been determined earlier.

Her condition has been steadily deteriorating and now she has been diagnosed as having a malignant brain tumour. She probably has less than a year to live. With this tragedy striking the family that I had seen as my haven in an uncertain world, it has become even more difficult to control my emotions. I no longer have the will to simply dismiss my sexuality as a low priority.

M. Or to live in a manner that denies your preference?

J. That's right. And ironically, it was through Erika that I saw the need to face this fact. Because of the increased tension caused by Sarah's illness, Erika persuaded me to go with her to a counsellor friend. Jane, the counsellor, immediately saw there was more to the problem between us than our critically sick daughter and after we answered some questions she eventually caught on to what it was. She said this issue needed to be out in the open between us so we could support each other in contending with the severe stress building up as Sarah's condition worsened. She also urged me to face the reality of who I was rather than just ignoring it.

That advice drove me to undertake a deeper examination of the struggle going on inside me. While I was stricken by Sarah's steady decline and deeply involved in trying to console her and be there for her, this whole sexuality thing was bubbling over in an incredibly powerful fashion. There wasn't anything I could do about it. I would have loved to have shoved it aside again and convinced myself of the need to devote all my time to my stricken child. But it was impossible.

M. How has your wife been reacting to this situation?

J. Erika is unable to understand the conflict within me. She accused me of showing a lack of concern for our daughter. That isn't true. I am intensely concerned but at the same time I have this uncontrollable urge, which I don't have the strength to fight.

M. So you moved out again.

J. I didn't want to. But the situation became intolerable. I had taken time off work with the company's approval so I could be with Sarah as much as possible. Then Gretchen, Erika's mother, flew out from Germany and moved into the house. Hannah and her husband arrived from Singapore and took rooms in a nearby hotel and came to visit every day. There was so much open hostility flowing towards me from my wife and her family that I felt like an intruder in my own home - evil incarnate in their eyes. The atmosphere was so oppressive I needed to escape from it periodically. But Erika insisted I had to stay home to help look after Sarah whenever I wasn't working although she herself went out from time to time. She insinuated that I was going to be screwing around with men or whatever came into her head.

I don't know how she could have imagined I could do that with our child desperately ill. It was just absolutely ridiculous. What I needed was someone who would hug me to ease the tension and anguish gripping me. I had friends who would do that. The tension between Erika and me was so intense I was afraid that if I defied her on this question there would be a full-scale blowup between us which would be traumatic for the children, especially Sarah.

Then, a specialist told us that within a few weeks we would no longer be able to care for Sarah properly and needed to put her in the children's hospital at Westmead. After she was admitted last week, I told Erika that I was moving out. A couple of guys offered me a room in their unit and I'm staying there until I find a small place I can afford. I'll be spending all my spare time at the hospital with Sarah but will no longer be under the extreme pressure of living at home with Erika and her mother.

M. How do you feel now?

J. I don't know. The first night in my friends' unit was pretty bad. I woke up about 3 o'clock in the morning with a terrible sense of guilt and hopelessness and anxiety about the children. While Sarah is foremost in my mind I am also deeply worried about Linda and Paul, who are now going to be without a father at time of crisis in the family. I'm especially uneasy about Paul, because as a four-year-old he needs stability and love from his mother and father. But I know that if I stayed Erika and Gretchen would be screaming at me and I would be screaming back and I don't want that to be going on in front of him. While I don't want to leave him, I know I have to because it would just get worse and worse between me and Erika.

There's all that - then on the other hand, there's a sense of relief at having made the break. A final break, I now believe.

M. You won't go back?

J. No.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The sunny Sydney autumn day and cloudless sky gave him a gratifying sense of being at home but did nothing to relieve Scott's low spirits. As he walked from Westmead Station along Hawkesbury Road to the Royal Alexandra Hospital For Children, he decided it had been a bad idea to go out to his house in Davidson. He had flown into Sydney from Kuala Lumpur the night before in response to a telephone call from his daughter-in-law, checking into a hotel near the Central Railway Station. Earlier that morning, he had taken a train north across the harbour to Chatswood and boarded a bus for Davidson. It was an impulsive decision, which he regretted when he alighted outside his former home. The office of the real estate agency which arranged tenancies for the property had not yet opened when he called from the hotel so he was not able to follow the usual procedure of asking them to obtain the tenant's formal approval for a visit. There was no time to stop by the agency and try to set up an appointment since he was due to meet Erika at Westmead at 11 a.m. Besides, landlords were normally required to give ten days' notice before visiting tenanted properties. So, unwilling to embarrass himself and the tenants with an unannounced call, he confined himself to gazing at the house from the bus stop.

It was the first residence, after more than 20 years of marriage, that he and Siu Mei could call their own. They had stayed in leased apartments in Hong Kong and when they had moved to Sydney had rented a unit until Scott obtained a bank loan to buy the Davidson house. As a new home owner for the first time, Scott had a sense of stability and contentment that he had not experienced before, enhanced by the fact that, after years of flat dwelling, he was at last living with his family in a house on a section with a garden and trees. Thinking back to those days, Scott recalled that it had been a vibrant time, with both their daughter and son exhibiting the spiritedness - and contrariness - common to adolescents. But even when differences between parents and children over education and careers led to heated arguments, the family bonds remained strong and harmony was eventually restored.

So much had changed, he did not want to think about it and tried to concentrate on more mundane matters, such as the condition of the premises and the grounds. He noted that the ghost gum at the front boundary looked even more impressive than the last time he saw it while the flower beds needed weeding. Despite his attempt at detachment, inevitably memories returned of the night his wife stepped from a bus and was struck by a car while crossing the road to their home. He was in the kitchen at the time, heard the squeal of brakes and the impact, and raced down the driveway to find her lifeless body on the road. The passage of the years had only dulled the pain.

After half an hour, the next bus pulled up at the stop. Stepping into it Scott came face to face with the same driver who had been on the Davidson route on the night his wife had made her last journey home.

"Mr Scott?" the man behind the wheel inquired, uncertain at first whether he had identified the

passenger correctly.

Scott nodded. They had met and talked briefly at the inquest into his wife's death. The shock of seeing the driver again as he was meditating morosely on the past left him unable to speak for a moment.

"You're back home again, then? I heard you had gone abroad."

"No," Scott replied. "Just visiting. I'm still working in South-East Asia."

"Well, have a nice stay." He took Scott's proffered money and gave him a ticket.

Siu Mei did not drive and Scott often picked her up at her shop or at Chatswood. As the bus climbed the hill leading away from his home, he was overwhelmed once more by guilt and sorrow over the fact that he had not, on that last night, agreed to his wife's suggestion that he join her in the city for dinner or, alternatively, arranged to meet her at the station. But he knew that allowing these recollections to seize control of his mind would drive him into a severe state of depression again and as he arrived at Chatswood turned his mind to what he would say to his grand-daughter.

At Central Railway Station he changed trains for Westmead, where he decided to walk the short distance to the hospital rather than wait 15 minutes for a bus. Thinking again about his wife's death had aggravated his anxiety over the illness of Sarah. She had not been well for some time but, at first, the doctors to whom Erika had taken her all came to the conclusion that there was nothing seriously wrong with the child. Finally, a series of tests revealed the presence of a brain tumour and the specialist consulted gave little hope of a recovery. She had deteriorated rapidly and was now in the children's hospital, where treatment had given way to palliative care. Erika had called Scott, desperate to talk to someone. He had been unaware of the grave nature of Sarah's illness and decided immediately to fly to Sydney to see his grand-daughter - for what could well be the last time.

As he passed the Children's Medical Research Institute and turned into the courtyard of the hospital, he was struck by the deeply sad thought that while most Sydney children could look forward to enjoying a profusion of glorious sun-drenched days like this one in the years stretching ahead, many young patients here had little time and little joy left to them. Passing through glass doors to a child-friendly lobby, bright with gaily-coloured walls, floors and ceilings and blow-up replicas of cartoon characters, he stood uncertainly for a moment looking for Erika or an information counter.

"Mr Scott?"

A man in his mid forties, wearing jeans, jogging shoes and a flowery sport shirt approached him with an outstretched hand.

"I'm Harry Reid. Erika asked me to look out for you. She's sitting with Sarah."

Scott shook his hand. "Are you a friend of Erika?"

“I try to be a friend to everyone who comes to the children’s hospital. I’m a catholic priest and this is my parish.”

As Father Reid led the way down a corridor, where sombre-faced parents of young patients stood talking in low voices or listening to doctors, he told Scott most of the children were suffering from leukemia.

“A few have tumours like Sarah. We try to bring parents of children with the same terminal illnesses together to try to reinforce the strength they need to put on a brave face for their kids. Often, as in the case of Sarah, it is the children who show the way, proving themselves to be incredibly courageous in the face of their pain and uncertain future.”

He led Scott into a room where four children were in beds separated by curtains. Erika rose from a chair and hugged her father-in-law.

“I’m so glad you came.” she said. “Will you sit with Sarah for a while. I need to have a little walk and talk with Harry and pull myself together.”

“Of course,” Scott said, moving forward to the bed where he could barely recognise the robust little girl he had last seen two years ago. Her body had shrunk with the creeping paralysis of the spreading cancer while her face was swollen from the drugs she had been given.

“Hello, grandpa,” she whispered.

“Hello, darling. It’s so good to see you.”

Scott fought to keep a smile on his face. He was afraid that at any moment he would break down and cry uncontrollably. Since his wife’s death, he had often, without warning, lost control of his emotions when the painful memory lying dormant in his mind was somehow brought to life by an unrelated event. He told himself he must maintain his composure on this occasion and generate the resolve to provide whatever succour he could for the seriously ill child lying before him.

His struggle was apparently obvious to Sarah.

“Don’t worry, Grandpa,” she said. “I’ll be all right.”

He sat down and took her hand.

“Would you like me to read to you from one of your books.”

“Yes, please.” She pointed to one of the volumes by her bed.

It was a story about four lively young girls caught up in a mystery involving a haunted house, an evil couple and a boy they had locked in a room. As he related their adventures, during which they ran along a forest path at night, scrambled over fences and climbed a tree to look into the boy’s room, she did not seem concerned that these were activities which she could no longer undertake.

She asked occasional questions, which he answered at length to keep her engaged, but after some time, he realised that she had fallen asleep. He continued to sit beside her, staring at her puffy face and closed eyes, with the slumped shoulders of a desperately tired, old man.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

May 2, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

You would have been proud of your grand-daughter, Sarah. She is astonishingly fearless and displaying great bravery as she battles a severely debilitating - and terminal - illness. I, however, had great difficulty in maintaining a calm demeanour as I sat beside Sarah and walked the corridors with Father Harry Reid meeting families and friends of dying children. Every day in Westmead children's hospital the human spirit is tested to the limit.

It was hard for me, not only because of Sarah's hopeless condition but also because of the bitterness of Erika's family over what they call James's "desertion". I was standing with Erika and her sister Hannah outside Sarah's room when her mother joined us. She had flown to Australia from her home in Hamburg some months earlier when Sarah was first taken ill and stayed for several weeks before returning to Germany. Now that her grand-daughter's condition had sharply deteriorated, she had travelled to Australia again.

Gretchen, whom I hadn't seen since her daughter's wedding to James, didn't even say hello before declaring sarcastically that I must be proud of the way my son had turned out. "Did you teach him anything about right and wrong?" she demanded. "I always knew he was an evil man."

This was plainly not true, of course. She had been as pleased as you and I were with the marriage of James and Erika, telling us at the time what a fine son we had raised. She had been even more flattering towards her son-in-law with each new grand-child, according to Erika.

However, there were obvious reasons for her anger. Her daughter had undergone a traumatic experience with the breakup of their union and James's declaration that he was gay. The separation must have been especially distressing for Gretchen because with the death of her husband she had been left to raise two daughters on her own. Now Erika was faced with the same stress of losing a husband and becoming a single mother. At the same time, the strain on everyone had been intensified by Sarah's terminal illness. But Gretchen's attack on me was unjustified and galling. To her credit, Erika came to my rescue by defending her husband.

"John has done nothing wrong," Erika told her mother. "None of what has happened is his fault." She turned to me. "Will he go to jail?"

"I hope so," her mother says. "He certainly deserves it."

“They should lock him up for 30 years,” Hannah added.

“I don’t know,” I said to Erika. “Singapore is tough on everyone who breaks the law and its sentences are harsh by our standards. I’ve asked one of Singapore’s top barristers to defend him.”

“Will you see him?”

“He’s due to appear in court later this week. I’ll stop off in Singapore and go to the hearing. The trial is probably some weeks or months away. He’ll probably be remanded in custody.”

“That means he won’t be able to come here to see Sarah?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“It must be killing him - knowing she’s dying and not able to be with her.”

“That’s nonsense,” Gretchen said. “Do you really think a man who has sex with underage boys cares a damn about his dying daughter.”

“Mother, I don’t believe he’s guilty of the charge against him. He may have destroyed my life but he’s a sensitive man who wouldn’t destroy the lives of children. And he loves Sarah and her sister and brother.”

“You really don’t doubt that he’s innocent?” I asked.

“I’m sure he is. He sent me a letter telling me not to give any credence to what they were saying he’d done. He said none of it was true. I believe him.”

I was touched by her faith in the man who, I’m being forced to accept, had left her for a male lover. I wanted to agree with her that James was innocent but I did not think the Singapore authorities would have arrested and charged him unless they were convinced they had a water-tight case.

Catherine had called again before I left for Sydney and I told her I had asked a lawyer I knew to represent him. I also said she should not get up her hopes. But she insisted her brother was innocent and asked me to make sure the lawyer understood that. I questioned how she could be sure that James was different from the scores of Australian homosexuals who went looking for young boys in Asia.

She angrily informed me that there I was, once again, showing my homophobic thinking. “You assume that because a man is gay he’s also a pedophile. The percentage of gays who have sex with under-age boys is no more, I’m sure, than the percentage of straight men who have sex with under-age girls. James is not a pedophile.”

“I am not homophobic,” I replied. “I just know what goes on in this part of the world.”

After a second visit to the children's hospital to say goodbye to Sarah and make a promise to come back to Sydney soon for another visit - although we both knew we might not see each other again - I walked with Father Reid to the entrance.

"I feel so helpless," I told him. "I suppose everyone here has the same reaction."

"You can't let yourself be overwhelmed by the notion that there is nothing you can do. We focus on trying to provide whatever support we can for the children. That means attempting to figure out what is most important to them - what they truly want - as they sense the graveness of their illnesses. With most of them, it is simply to be loved. Sarah is a very mature young lady for her age. She tries to put all of us at ease. But she also needs the love of every member of her family. It is a tragedy that her father cannot be here. Nevertheless, I know she was very happy to see you."

"Nothing else seems relevant in the face of the certainty of her death at just eight years of age," I said.

"Everything in our lives is relevant. We are born, we have our life's experiences and we die. Some die younger than others. But I know what you mean. You are thinking of your son. I am sure you always loved him when he was a boy - whatever he did. You should continue to love him and do what you can to help him. He is still your son. You can't abandon him now."

"I'll do what I can," I said.

So I leave tomorrow for Singapore. I should be experiencing some emotion at the prospect of seeing James again after all the time that has passed. But I sense nothing. I have probably been emotionally drained by my visit to the children's hospital and the hours I spent sitting at Sarah's bedside. I do not want to think. My mind is a blank except for your memory, which, in all certainty, is what keeps me going.

All my love,

John

Chapter Twenty-Nine

As the fasten-seat-belts sign was switched off, Scott loosened the strap over his waist but left it latched. He had experienced enough air turbulence over the years to know the danger of not being firmly attached to his seat. He stretched his legs as far as the seat in front of him would allow and pushed his arms overhead. Although he had woken up hours earlier in order to catch his flight, his limbs were as rigid as if he had just got out of bed. Without his morning swim, his joints were stiff and his muscles tight. Settling back into his seat, he decided it was not only his body that was out of sorts. His mind seemed to have turned itself off. He did not normally drink alcohol until the end of the day but, despite the fact that it was just after 11 a.m., he was glad to see flight attendants

preparing a drinks trolley in the galley not far from his seat. A beer would be very welcome, he reflected. It had been a stressful few days. And he faced more emotional strain in Singapore where he would be seeing his son for the first time in almost two years. Even in the relaxing setting of their previous Singapore encounter in the home of the Argosy correspondent the tension between them had been high. It could only be worse when they next met in the forbidding aura of a court room, with James in the dock and facing the prospect of having his life as a free man shortened significantly, as if his middle years had been excised by a warp in time.

Scott wondered what kind of man his son would be after spending several years in a Singapore jail. Would he have been seriously soured by it? Would it break him to the point where he was not interested in trying to make a new life for himself? Scott had seen how the once proud and self-confident Anwar had been made bitter and dispirited by the failure of his appeals against his convictions for corruption and sodomy, causing him to rail angrily - and futilely - against the judges.

It occurred to him that he was giving no consideration to the possibility that the charge against James might not be proved. He tried to find a reason to be less pessimistic but his effort was fruitless. He recalled Erika's belief that James was innocent. His daughter had expressed the same sentiment. But he could not summon a single positive argument in his son's favour. Was he still so angry with James that he could not find any good in him? No, it wasn't that. His anger had subsided with the passing of time. So why?

Then it struck him that he was making his judgement on the basis of the fact that what his son was alleged to have done was so common throughout South-East Asia that he accepted the official indictment without question. Each year, thousands of Australians and men from other Western countries flew into the region to take advantage of the social conditions - poverty, unemployment, corruption and a fatalist culture - that had created a widespread sex industry catering to foreigners. While the economic development of Singapore and Malaysia over the past 10 years had made it easier for people in those two countries to find jobs that preserved their self-respect, large numbers of women and men had been forced to turn to prostitution to survive in Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. Cambodia and Indonesia, especially, had become playgrounds for Australian pedophiles, who avoided prosecution by bribing police. Among them was a small, notorious clique of diplomats.

Most men seeking sex in South-East Asia were not pedophiles by inclination but a large proportion favoured young partners and did not concern themselves with whether they were under the age of consent. If they gave the question any consideration they justified their indifference by the fact that the law was not applied rigorously in any country except Singapore and it was common throughout the region for girls to become brides when they had barely reached puberty. As a young man, Scott had been no different from other expatriates, responding to the insistent signals from his libido by looking for a prostitute with a woman's body and a youthful face when he did not have a regular girl-friend. When he first went to Jakarta and saw the kupu kupu malam - night moths - standing in small groups beside the food stalls along the main kali he came up with the idea of persuading one of them to live with him on a long-term basis. One evening when he came out of the Kosy Korner, a bar run by a Dutchman who had taken out Indonesian citizenship, his eyes fell on a brown-skinned girl with a pretty face standing behind three women who were smiling and

waving to him. She appeared diffident in contrast with the others, making her more interesting to him. She was dressed in a thin, cheap skirt and blouse and wearing sandals, like a typical Javanese from one of the kampungs on the edge of the capital. Her raven hair, which fell to her shoulders, was shiny from coconut oil. As he approached her she studied him with a mature, knowing gaze, although she looked no older than the uniformed teenage girls whom he admired each morning as they rode to school in bejaks, the Indonesian pedicabs.

“Selamat malam,” he said in greeting, adding in his clumsy Indonesian. “What’s your name?”

“Kartika.”

“Will you come home with me?”

She turned to one of the older women, who spoke rapidly in Javanese.

“Mesti bayar 50 ringgit,” Kartika said to Scott.

He handed her a 50 ringgit note, which was worth a few cents in the Singapore currency used to pay him. She gave the note to the other woman, who addressed Scott in Indonesian: “Besok pagi tuan beri uang begitu Kartika kembali lagi kampung dengan bejak.”

“Saya,” Scott said, agreeing to give the girl money the next day so she could hire a bejak to take her back to her kampung.

Kartika picked up a small square of batik cloth with the corners knotted, which was holding her few possessions, and he led her to the taxi he had hired for the evening.

Scott shared a residence in Menteng, one of Jakarta’s better suburbs, with three other Australians, including the representative of an insurance company, which was the official lessee of the property. He had not informed his co-tenants of his plan to have a live-in companion but saw no reason to seek their approval since he lived separately in a converted garage, joining them for meals in the house when he was not eating in a restaurant.

He was sexually excited by Kartika’s slender body, her small, firm breasts and her smooth, hairless skin and repeatedly thrust himself into her during the night. She was tense at first, when he removed her clothes, but gradually relaxed when he treated her gently, stroking her neck, back and thighs and kissing her lips and lower belly. But she was a passive partner, showing no reciprocal passion.

Nevertheless, he decided that he wanted her to stay with him. In the morning, he opened the small English-Indonesian dictionary he carried with him and found the words to put forward his proposal.

“Saya mau Kartika tinggal disini. Bisa?”

He said he would pay her 250 ringgit a week, presuming that the guarantee of earning that much

money on a regular basis would be more attractive than the uncertain prospect of making 50 ringgit a night from different customers.

She stared at him for a moment and then smiled for the first time since he had met her.

“Saya harus bertanya makcik,” she said.

The “aunt” she planned to ask was presumably the woman she was with the previous night.

When he nodded, she said she would return to his home later and tell him if she could stay. Having prepared himself for the possibility that the older woman would say no, he was pleased to find Kartika waiting outside the gate when he returned to the house after a quiet news day.

It seemed to him that the arrangement was the perfect solution to his pressing desire for a female companion, allowing him to focus his attention each day on his work as a foreign correspondent in the knowledge that he had someone to take care of his sexual appetite each night. At that time, the possibility that he might meet a woman in Jakarta who would cause him to want more than a carnal relationship with her did not enter his mind.

Chapter Thirty

May 3, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

I don't know what you would have thought about me if I had ever told you that I had installed a young prostitute in my residence in Jakarta before I met you. It would have reinforced the bad impression I made on you at our first encounter at an American Embassy staff party to which an American colleague took me uninvited, after we had had several beers at the Des Indes hotel. As I was being greeted graciously by the host, despite not being on the guest list, I spied a beautiful young Chinese woman on the other side of the room, charged over and introduced myself. You gave me a cool reception, giving me your name out of politeness and then excusing yourself and walking around me to join friends. Years later, you told me I was grinning like an idiot and smelled strongly of the alcohol I had drunk. After that unfortunate occasion, we saw each other regularly at official functions but you refused all my invitations to dinner. Then, eight months after our first meeting, you surprised me at a dull, Foreign Ministry reception when I announced I was going to a restaurant and added negatively that I didn't suppose you would like to join me. You said: “That's a good idea. I'll come with you.”

Soon we were lovers but I never told you about the girl, Kartika, whom I took off the streets to satisfy my sexual desire. When I first took her home I told my house mates I had decided I needed a servant to keep my room clean and launder my shirts. Their ribald comments indicated they did not believe me but no objections were raised to Kartika taking up residence with me. The woman

who served as a cook and the babu, a girl who cleaned the house, initially were rude to her. But they agreed to let her eat with them when I said I would give them a sum of money for her food, which I knew was enough to let them make a small profit.

I bought some shampoo and insisted Kartika use it to wash her hair because I could not stand the smell of coconut oil. I also took her to the market at Pasar Baru and, to her delight, bought her some new clothes. Everything went smoothly until, just over a week after she had moved in with me, I found I had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. I took her with me to a Dutchman known among the expatriate community as the “clap doctor”, who diagnosed the infection as gonorrhoea. When the doctor took out a needle to give us both a large dose of penicillin Kartika let out an alarmed cry and shook her head. But I was firm and she reluctantly allowed the doctor to stab her in a buttock, shrieking as the point of the needle entered her skin.

After two more visits to the doctor, we were both declared free of the disease and as we settled into what seemed to be a mutually enjoyable relationship, I had a sense of self-satisfaction that my idea had worked out so well. Kartika seemed happy with the arrangement after I had agreed to her spending Sundays at the kampung with her family. I sternly told her she must never let another man touch her and she solemnly assured me she would not give her body to anyone else.

The idyll was interrupted by a summons from Singapore. I was required in the South-East Asian headquarters of Reuters to help at the regional desk for a fortnight while a colleague was on leave. I paid Kartika in advance for two weeks and also gave the cook some money to let her sleep in the servants' quarters while I was away.

“Tuan kembali lagi Jakarta?” she asked anxiously as I packed my bags.

“Betul,” I said emphatically, telling her not to fret. I promised I would see her in two weeks.

But I had to stay an extra ten days in Singapore and when I returned to the house, Kartika was not there. The cook told me that three days after the date of my expected return, she had left without saying anything to anyone. After waiting for a week to see if she would come back to the house, I went to the roundabout at the end of the street where the bejak drivers played cards while waiting for customers. I asked an old man, who was one of the regulars, if he had taken the girl who stayed at the Australian house, as it was known to the locals, to her kampung.

Kartika? Yes, twice, he said.

After some haggling over a price, he agreed to go to the kampung and return with Kartika or leave a message for her that I was back.

The next morning, I woke as I became aware of a hand pulling down the sarong I wrapped around my waist when I went to bed. Then Kartika was on top of me, as I had taught her, laughing while she rocked herself backwards and forwards. She had called the babu to open the gate for her and slipped into my room after finding the door unlocked.

Later, she said her makcik had told her when I left for Singapore that I would not return. She

refused to believe her “aunt” at first but decided she must be right when I was not back after the two weeks had passed.

“What have you been doing?” I asked. “Did you give your body to other men while I was away.”

“No,” she insisted. “I stayed at the kampung. I helped my sister look after her children.”

I was not sure whether I believed her but decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. Ten days later that proved to have been a mistake. I had contracted gonorrhoea again.

“You went back to being a kupu-kupu malam,” I said angrily.

“Makcik made me,” she said, crying.

It was clear to me that my grand plan would never work. I gave her money and told her not to come back. She did not argue. In her world, she did what she was told. When she entered mine, her situation was even less secure. She was a powerless victim of circumstances - young and vulnerable. I had taken her in and then cast her out with little regard for what her future might be.

It is painful for me now to think about this. I am overcome with a strong sense of shame. I told myself at the time she was 16 or 17. But she may well have been younger. Fifteen perhaps. If that was so and if there had been an effective system of justice in Indonesia at the time she would have been taken off the streets and I would have been prosecuted for the carnal knowledge of a minor. But the police were more interested in collecting bribes than wasting their time, as they saw it, taking a prostitute or a customer to court. Otherwise, I might have found myself facing a charge similar in its seriousness to the case against our son.

There is no doubt that I committed an offence if Kartika was 15. I cannot hide that fact from myself. In James’s case, he has maintained his innocence. Am I transferring my guilt to our son? Am I judging him by my own transgression, assuming without any evidence that he would act in the same way? It is a worrying possibility that makes me wonder to what extent my judgements on other issues might have been subconsciously coloured by personal experience. Perhaps it is time for me to stop being judgmental towards James on this or any other question.

There is another thought in my mind. Would you forgive me for the heartless way I treated a defenseless girl not long past childhood?

All my love,

John

Chapter Thirty-One

As the the MRT station escalator carried Scott up to Raffles Place, his eyes rested on the bewitching bottom of a slender Chinese woman in a tight-fitting yellow dress. He impulsively took a step forward to place himself alongside her so he could see her face. She was young and pretty and as she swung her head towards him he attempted a friendly smile. There was no response. She turned away and as they reached the top of the moving staircase strode swiftly towards the station entrance.

Scott sighed as he walked behind her. The reaction from attractive females was always the same these days. He could not escape the fact that he had reached an age when he was no longer of interest to members of the opposite sex who interested him. Nevertheless, as he moved out into the open surrounded by other smartly-dressed and good-looking women, he wished he was still living in Singapore. The island state exuded energy, enterprise and efficiency, in contrast with the indolent ambience of Kuala Lumpur, encouraging him to think that he just might get lucky one day and find a suitable companion among the many manifest candidates. Returning to Singapore was like stepping from an old black and white television into a set showing colour images. He was not a fan of the Singapore government, with its righteous attitude, paternalistic approach and certitude that there was no need for an opposition, but he had to admit the city state worked effectively, unlike Kuala Lumpur.

Glancing about at the modern office blocks on each side of the square onto which he had emerged, his mind flowed back nostalgically to a time when the main interest for him in that part of town had been Robinson's department store and the money-changers' cubicles with their iron-barred windows, where he had bought the currencies he needed for travel to other countries in the region. It was just a short stroll from where the Reuter office used to be when he was a young correspondent for the British news agency. But there weren't many old buildings left from that time. The area from Shenton Way on the seafront to Chinatown had been stripped of its shop-houses and three and four-storey sandstone structures to make way for the concrete, steel and glass towers that were status symbols of central business districts in major capitals around the world. His foreign currency transactions were now conducted through United Overseas Bank, the main offices of which were on adjacent sites - a 30-storey skyscraper on the north-west corner of Raffles Place, and, across Chulia Street, an even taller and more imposing edifice soaring towards the clouds at the edge of the Singapore River.

He mourned the disappearance of the colonial architecture of Singapore but he did not miss the stomach-churning smells emanating from the open drains that lined the streets four decades ago, when he was working for Reuters. Today, Singapore was truly clean and green, as its government liked to pronounce. You could even sit beside the Singapore River on Boat Quay without wanting to hold your nose, sipping a beer outside Harry's Bar or dining at one of a multicultural mix of restaurants. Barges had dredged the stinking sludge from the bottom of the waterway, which was once crowded with junks ferrying cargo to and from ships in the harbour, and dumped it at sea.

He waited with the patient and law-abiding Singaporeans for the pedestrian lights to flash green before crossing Market Street and then turning into Church Street, which he followed west past Pidemco Centre to New Bridge Road. Straight ahead, on the other side of Eu Tong Sen Street, was Havelock Road, Central Square and his destination, the Subordinate Courts building. He had decided to take the MRT to Raffles Place and walk through his old stamping ground, rather than

take a taxi from his hotel, to bring back memories of the past, which seemed so care-free compared with the present. But he had overlooked the inadvisability of walking any distance in a business suit in Singapore, where even at 9 in the morning the heat and humidity was causing sweat to trickle from his armpits. As he walked through Central Square to the court complex he took off his jacket and raised his arms to let the warm air under them in the hope it would dry his damp shirt.

The court area was familiar to him as he had covered several trials in Singapore before moving to Kuala Lumpur. His knowledge of the justice system in the island republic, where most of the laws and legal procedures, as in Malaysia, had been introduced by the British colonial authorities, went even further back. However, when he was first in Singapore in the 1950s, the cases of interest to the media usually involved pro-independence political activists charged with internal security or sedition breaches. Many of them were defended by a brilliant young lawyer whom the press corps knew as Harry Lee. "Don't believe anything that bastard says, he's a bloody communist," a British official once told Scott. But Lee Kuan Yew allied himself with the communists only as long as it suited him and went on to become free Singapore's first Prime Minister. At that time, when he was in his mid-twenties, Scott was certain he had the best job in the world and seldom deliberated on the future as he wrung from each day every exciting experience it could offer him. His musing was interrupted by a shout from behind him.

"Hey, John."

He turned and saw Peter Lee, a journalist with *The Chronicle*, whom he had first met when they were both reporting the trial of Michael Fay, an 18-year-old American student caned and jailed for vandalising expensive cars of wealthy Singaporeans with spray paint. The youth's sentence had highlighted the harsh punishments imposed in Singapore for relatively minor offences.

Lee was a senior member of the news staff who was usually allowed to choose the events he wished to cover. He steered clear of the Singapore political scene, which, he told Scott, he found boring due to the lack of a strong and effective opposition and little independent thinking among the government party faithful. Peter said he had fallen asleep when sent to cover parliament and ended up with an empty notebook. He had avoided dismissal by interviewing a group of school children who had attended the session and writing an entertaining article on their impressions of politicians at work.

"So the Singapore justice system is once more going to come under the fearless scrutiny of the famous journalist John Scott over its persecution of a poor benighted foreigner for breaking one of our draconian laws," Lee said with a grin, grabbing Scott's hand in a firm grip.

"But, with all the political goings-on in KL, I did not expect to see you here covering the case of an ad agency executive charged with sodomy of a male juvenile."

"I assumed I had more important things to do in KL, but my foreign editor thought otherwise," Scott replied as they walked together up the steps at the entrance to the Subordinate Courts building. The foyer was bustling with people lining up to pay traffic fines, worried-looking men and women facing minor breaches of the law and sad-faced relatives of people charged with

serious offences and remanded in custody, who were hoping to exchange a word or at least a glance with their family members when they appeared in court.

“Now, John, you know you should never forget the human interest stories. You’re too mired in politics. Of course, there’s more to write in KL than here. Our MPs seldom say anything that’s even slightly controversial and as for forming a faction, forget it. But up in your neck of the woods, you just have to walk into the World Trade Centre during an UMNO general assembly and someone will whisper in your ear the latest move in a leadership feud or factional dispute. There’s more dissent in the Malaysian government party than outside it.”

“Yeah, that’s true. So what do we have here?”

“Pretty straight forward, I think. I’m looking at it from the cultural contrast between an affluent Australian and a kampung Malay.”

“Kampung Malay? You mean the young man in the case comes from a rural area of Malaysia rather than Singapore?”

“Yes. His family lives just outside Johor Baru.” Johor Baru was the city on the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, which was joined to the island of Singapore by a causeway.

“How strong is the case against Tan?”

“Pretty strong. The police say he arranged with the youth, Hassan Aziz, to come to his room after a dinner party at a Chinese restaurant. Acting on a tip, police went to Carr’s hotel room and caught them together.”

“What’s the charge and the penalty for conviction?”

“Sodomy with a minor. Up to 10 years and twelve strokes of the cane.”

“Shit. That’s rough.”

“My dear Mr Scott, you should know that people committing such atrocious crimes must be punished severely as a deterrent to others who might be tempted to engage in similar lascivious behaviour,” Lee said with mock primness. “Of course, the fact that even the mandatory death penalty has not prevented people from using and trafficking in heroin casts some doubt on the principle of deterrence.”

“What’s happening to Hassan?”

“He’ll be charged with sodomy in a juvenile court.”

Lee added: “You know, this is just a preliminary hearing. The case will be adjourned after the charges are read, possibly a word from the defence and a plea taken. It’s Court No. 3.”

Scott nodded and followed Lee as he led the way to the court designated for the hearing, trying to make up his mind whether he should tell his colleague of his personal interest in the case. Inside, a group of lawyers were chatting together while friends and relatives of prisoners were taking seats in the public gallery. The Chronicle reporter stopped in front of a tall, thin man, with cropped hair and a magnificent military-style moustache, a relic of his days as a sergeant-major in the British army. Like others around him, he was garbed English-style for court in black gown and white barrister's "bib".

"Good morning, Jega. Look who's come all the way from KL to trumpet your skills as a defence lawyer to the Australian public," Lee said.

The ethnic Indian lawyer turned with a smile to Scott.

"Hello, John. Living in the land of the Great Pharaoh doesn't seem to have aged you greatly." Great Pharaoh was the term applied to Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, by the fundamentalist opposition Parti Islam se-Malaysia, or PAS. "Dr M, on the other hand, is showing the strain of the continuing political and social tensions arising from the Anwar affair. I sometimes wish our ruling PAP would show the same propensity as Mahathir's UMNO for internal power struggles. It would make our task much easier. Sadly, ministers and PAP party members alike toe the party line. In Malaysia, PAS has clearly benefited from the clash between Mahathir and Anwar. Here, it's the opposition that always seems to be in trouble."

"With a little help from your friends in the PAP," Scott remarked.

Solomon Jegathesan was not only a barrister but also founder and leader of the Singapore Labour Party, who had pitted himself against the PAP for more than three decades with a doggedness and recklessness that had provoked the government party but failed to loosen their hold on power. At 67, he should have been able to retire from the daily grind of standing up in court to represent a string of rogues, rascals, dupes and other assorted felons. But he needed the money. A series of government-instigated defamation suits had driven him into bankruptcy, which also meant he was barred from running as a candidate for parliament. When he was not arguing a case before a Singapore judge, he could often be seen standing on a street corner flogging copies of the party organ, *The Anvil*, the contents of which frequently seemed to be almost inviting another action for defamation.

"Nevertheless, I will keep on fighting the good fight," Jegathesan said in a stentorian voice, which he had developed on the parade ground and now used to address the bench as a lawyer and to denounce the government at political rallies.

"You're here to defend Tan?" Lee asked.

"Yes."

"Did the Australian High Commission approach you?"

"No," Jegathesan said, adding after Scott failed to volunteer his involvement: "A relative."

“It looks like a hopeless task,” Lee remarked.

“We never say die - in court or in politics,” the lawyer said with a smile.

Scott did not find this reassuring, given the desperate state of Jegathesan’s political fortunes. He asked whether there was any chance of Tan being released on bail.

“That will be my main focus today.” He shrugged. “But on that matter, I am not optimistic.”

He excused himself and moved forward to the section reserved for lawyers.

Scott’s attention switched to an officer opening a door leading to a corridor and stairwell used by police to escort prisoners to their assigned courts. Standing outside under guard were a group of men - an old Malay, three young Chinese, a middle-aged Caucasian and a sixth person of mixed parentage. A shiver of agitation ran through Scott as he recognised his son. While he had come to court in the knowledge that James was to be arraigned, the sight of him among a group of prisoners disturbed him deeply. He was further unsettled by the appearance of his son, who looked haggard and thinner than he had been 18 months earlier.

A bark of “All rise” from the duty police officer heralded the entrance of the judge, Marcus Soong. After everyone had been seated again, the court clerk called : “James Tan.”

“That’s a surprise,” Lee remarked in a whisper to Scott as James entered the courtroom with a police officer beside him. “I had assumed the nervous chap with the shaven head and gold pin in his right ear was the accused in this case. This fellow looks too young and straight to be a homosexual, far less a pedophile. The pedophiles I’ve seen have been mainly men over 45. He looks like he should be tending a barbecue in a Sydney backyard while his wife and a couple of kids look on. But as a reporter I should know not to judge people by appearances and, besides, with a name like Tan he had to be either Chinese or Eurasian. He must have a Chinese father and Australian mother.”

Scott acknowledged to himself on reflection that if James Tan was not his son, he would have probably made the same mistake. James was a tall, good-looking, broad-shouldered man, with an athletic appearance gained from playing top-grade basketball and swimming competitively. The prisoner did not fit the heterosexual’s stereotype of a homosexual.

He was irritated by the apparent existence of this flaw in John Scott, which, like his demonstrated prejudice against homosexuals, was contrary to his professed belief in tolerance. He had always urged his his sons to be open-minded and try to avoid pigeon-holing people by outward appearances. He told them that, as with the colour of people’s skin, their race or religion should not be a basis on which to pass judgement on them,. He said that despite the many disparate aspects of their backgrounds, he and his Chinese wife had learned to live together in harmony and with mutual respect for each other’s racial heritage. When he first went to Asia in his twenties, he did not see race as a barrier to understanding between different peoples, probably because his job provided him with the opportunity to meet a more diverse range of Asians than most first-time visitors.

He was able to differentiate between people simply living out their lives as best they could and vile or corrupt leaders dedicated to the preservation of their power. He discovered that he had common interests with many Asians despite cultural differences and quickly developed friendships with a number of men and women who helped him comprehend more about their societies and sometimes subtly changed his way of thinking. He still found much to criticise within Asia and there were numerous individuals he disliked intensely but he did not consider himself a racist. Features of Australian society and a goodly number of Australians affected him in a similar fashion. Racial and religious hatreds persisted in the world but he clung to the hope that coexistence would eventually prevail. He believed that an obstacle to this goal was the stereotyping of groups, which prevented people from seeing others as individuals who might be just like themselves.

But now he had to accept that he was guilty of stereotyping in the case of homosexuals. It seemed that his early years of immersion in the Australian heterosexual, male locker-room culture of denigrating homosexuals had predisposed him to classify them all as mincing, limp-wristed queens although he knew from experience that this was not true. The homosexual men he had met came in all shapes and sizes and their sexual orientation was not always immediately apparent as he had discovered with the actor who had climbed into his bed after the cast party. Yet when his eyes saw such job classifications as Qantas flight attendant, ballet dancer or hairdresser, the first word association that came to mind was “homosexual”, with an accompanying image of softness or weakness.

As James was ushered into the dock, his eyes swept the courtroom and alighted on Scott. He grimaced as if fighting an inner emotion, managed a barely perceptible nod and then turned to his lawyer, who gave him a reassuring smile.

“He seems to know you,” Lee remarked.

“He’s my son.”

“My God.” Lee stared at Scott. “I’m sorry. You must have been devastated by this.”

“I was devastated 18 months ago when he told me he was gay.” Scott felt a sense of relief now he had revealed his connection with the case to Lee.

“I remember you told me your late wife was Chinese and you had a son and daughter. Is Tan his mother’s family name?”

“Yes. He took it in reaction to my anger over his decision to leave his wife to make a new life for himself as a homosexual. I now regret my unbridled criticism of him. I should have made a greater effort to understand what was going on in his mind - or, at least, acted in a calmer fashion.”

Scott turned to his left as a man sat down beside him.

“You’re John Scott, aren’t you? I recognised you from the photo your paper uses with your byline.” He spoke in a whisper, so as not to attract the attention of the judge, who was shuffling

some papers in front of him.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m from the Australian High Commission. Henry Jordan.”

“Where’s Tony Speer these days.” Scott had met Speer during the Michael Fay case.

“He’s back in Canberra. Will you be coming back to Singapore when the trial starts?”

“I guess so. Have you spoken to the Singapore Foreign Ministry about Tan?”

“Only to inform them that we’re taking an interest in the case and to make our usual comments that we’re certain the Singapore authorities will ensure he’s treated in due accordance with the law. We don’t interfere in these matters unless there is some clear breach of international practice. Many Singapore laws are, of course, much harsher than ours but we can’t do anything about that.”

Justice Soong completed arranging his papers and nodded to the clerk, who stepped forward until he was face to face with the defendant and read a statement charging him with committing the offence of sodomy with a minor. When he was finished he asked Tan if he understood the charge.

“Yes,” he said.

“How do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

The judge turned to the prosecutor, a youthful-looking Chinese. “Mr Wong?”

“Your Honour, the prosecution will be ready to proceed with this case in nine weeks and is requesting that the defendant be remanded until a date around that time suitable to Your Honour.”

Jegathesan was on his feet with a swiftness belying his age. “Your Honour, this matter should be dealt with speedily so that the defendant can clear his name. But it seems we have a prosecution so inefficient that it requires nine weeks to prepare its case. The defendant should not be penalised for the snail’s pace of the Attorney General’s office by losing his freedom for another nine weeks. I strongly urge Your Honour to allow him to be released on bail. The defendant will tell the court he has been set up, that he did not invite the youth he is alleged to have sodomised to his room and that no sexual act took place. ”

“Your Honour, with due respect to Mr Jegathesan, that is what the defendant could be expected to say in this case,” Wong responded. “The prosecution will show that the defendant was apprehended in bed in his hotel room with the minor in question. Your Honour, nine weeks is not an excessive period for a matter of this nature to be held over and the prosecution strenuously opposes bail. It would be all too easy for a person with the financial resources of an advertising executive to find a people smuggler prepared to spirit him off the island by sea to a neighbouring

country for a fat fee.”

Jegathesan exploded with an indignant attack on Wong for suggesting that the defendant would abscond but after further argument, the judge refused bail and set November 6 as the date for the trial to begin. As James was led from the court he did not look at his father.

Chapter Thirty-Two

May 4, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

As a journalist I have spent a lot of time in courts, covering a wide range of cases, from robbery with violence to gang rape, from multiple murders to the kidnapping of children. But nothing in my past experience prepared me for the sight of my own son appearing before a court on a charge which, if it had been laid against him a few years ago, I would have found bizarre and dismissed as someone's idea of a sick joke. But this was a court in Singapore, where crime is a serious matter and humour is rare.

This is a state where a political prisoner was kept in detention or under a form of home arrest for 30 years - at one point outlandishly restricted to a small house in the middle of an entertainment park on Sentosa Island - and where a number of naive young Hong Kong women acting as “mules” for heroin syndicates have been executed for smuggling the drug into Singapore. An Amnesty International report said Singapore had the highest execution rate in the world relative to its population. In the last ten years, hundreds of people have been hanged for drug trafficking, murder and other crimes. The organisation said the per capita rate of executions was three times higher than Saudi Arabia, the country next in frequency on the list of countries where the death penalty is applied.

Over the years, Singapore introduced tough penalties for littering, spray-painting graffiti on walls and the chewing of gum (globs of which, it said, stuck to shoes and jammed train doors). The country's laws reflect a puritanical attitude towards sex. It isn't just intimacy between men that is forbidden and can lead to a jail sentence. Oral sex between a man and a woman is also a criminal offence, for which both parties can be sentenced to a jail term. Residents of Singapore would be wise, it seems, to stick to the missionary position and not engage in any fancy coupling.

The seriousness of the situation had clearly shaken James. You remember how full of zest and mental strength he was when he was starting out in advertising and how his confidence grew as he advanced from being little more than an office boy to writing prize-winning copy for the ads of major brand names. All the confidence he had then seems to have drained from him. Standing in the dock he looked desolate and broken in spirit.

After the initial shock of seeing James brought into court as a prisoner, I found myself following

proceedings as if it was just another court case I had been assigned to cover. I think this was due to my sense of hopelessness over the fact there was nothing I could do to alter what was happening.

When the hearing ended, I approached Solomon Jegathesan, the lawyer representing James, and requested him to tell my son that I would like a meeting with him. Jega followed James out of the court and returned a short time later to say he did not wish to talk to me. This upset me but I pressed him to talk to James again before he was taken back to the prison where he is being held. I asked him to tell James that I had just been in Sydney and had spent several hours with Sarah, who had said she missed her father. Jega managed to catch up with James and his escorts before he was put in a prison van and returned to tell me my son would see me. The lawyer said he would contact the authorities to obtain permission for me to visit James at the prison.

I do not know what I will say to him but I am obligated at the very least to provide him with the latest information about Sarah's condition, even though it was quite discouraging, and find out if there is anything further that can be done to help his defence.

It is hard for me to think clearly these days. James's incarceration in a prison and the impending death of Sarah are still in the realm of imaginings of my mind. When reality sets in I hope I will be able to remain stoic.

All my love,

John

Chapter Thirty-Three

Scott looked at his watch to check the time and simultaneously noted the date, May 5, 2000. He was still finding it hard to grasp that the years now began with a two instead of a one. Or that there were fewer years before him than behind him. He contemplated this calmly, finding it did not perturb him. His life seemed to have entered a stage where he could no longer be surprised or moved. There was nothing to gladden him in his immediate past and nothing to look forward to in his future. Two years ago he had a brighter outlook on life. He had settled down to a steady work routine and had been buoyed by the expectation that, with the support of his son and daughter, the steadying normality of their family lives and the regular reports about the activities of his grandchildren, he could face the future. But that hopeful phase now seemed a thousand years ago.

"There's plenty of time," the man beside him in the back seat of the 20-year-old Bentley said, apparently thinking Scott was apprehensive about their slow progress in Singapore's morning peak hour traffic. But he had merely wanted to see how many minutes it would be before he was face to face with his son for the first time since their emotional confrontation in Singapore in the home of his friend Farmer in 1998.

With the passage of the months since his son's declaration that he was gay and that his marriage

was at an end, Scott's distress and anger had slowly ebbed as his mind recognised he was not going to be able to change the situation. He had remembered the simple phrase often used by his wife, which had helped him after her death: "What is, is." To allow rage and frustration to consume his mind long after the event that sparked them was energy-wasting and ultimately self-destructive. He knew he must move on.

His gradual progress towards some degree of mental order was aided by the pressure of work. It had been a busy period, with most of his time taken up covering the two trials of Anwar. At the end of the first hearing, the former deputy prime minister had been found guilty of four charges of corrupt practices and sentenced to six years imprisonment. Then he had been tried on a single sodomy charge, convicted and given a nine-year jail sentence. He was now effectively removed from the political process after enraging his former mentor with his ungrateful grab for power. As Scott drove to the Queenstown Remand Prison with Solomon Jegathesan, the lawyer he had asked to defend his son, he remembered again how Anwar had grown increasingly angry and embittered as he was repeatedly refused bail and kept in jail through the course of his two trials. His disposition had worsened with his convictions and his subsequent unsuccessful appeals. It made Scott anxious about the effect a conviction and prison sentence would have on James.

At the same time as Scott's anger had slowly dissipated, following the traumatic events of 1998, a numbness had spread through part of his mind, deadening his feelings towards his son, as if he had been injected with an anaesthetic. His decision to help James by finding a Singapore lawyer was made almost dispassionately, as if he was a non-interested party rendering assistance at the request of a friend. Now, however, he was beginning to wonder uneasily whether the meeting ahead would upset his relative calm and trigger a new emotional turbulence in him.

"There it is," Jega said, pointing to a complex, which was slightly ahead of them on the right-hand side of the road, with high concrete walls, watch towers and a barbed-wire perimeter fence.

Scott nodded. It was not his first visit to the prison. He had gone there in June, 1994, to observe and report on the release of Michael Fay. The American student's case had strained relations between Singapore and the United States, where the notion of a youth from St. Louis, Missouri, being subjected to the brutality of being flogged with a 1.2 metre length of rattan by a specially-trained prison officer had prompted widespread outrage. Washington's indignation ensured broader interest across the globe and Scott was asked to provide his newspaper with details of what a caning entailed in Singapore. A former guard informed him that a prisoner was stripped and forced to bend over a wooden frame, to which he was secured by straps attached to his arms and legs. The first strokes of the rattan were laid across the victim's buttocks in a non-overlapping sequence so that someone sentenced to only a few strokes could escape with a bruised but unbroken skin. However, an offender receiving more than a dozen strokes would end up with torn flesh on which a doctor painted an antiseptic solution.

Fay had been sentenced to four months' jail and six strokes of the cane. US President Bill Clinton said the sentence was "excessive" and appealed for clemency. The caning was reduced to four strokes. Scott had wondered at the time how he would have responded if it was his son who had been stripped and lashed. But he could not then imagine James engaging in the vandalism that had landed Fay in jail. Now his son was accused of a far more serious crime and faced a more severe

punishment in terms of both imprisonment and caning. As he contemplated this dreadful and degrading prospect, he perceived that his earlier detachment had been replaced by a father's deep sense of despair.

The driver made a right hand turn across the oncoming traffic and brought the nose of the old Bentley up to steel gates to the right of a sign reading, Queenstown Remand Prison. After a guard was shown a pass, the car was allowed to pass through into a compound with a parking area for visitors.

The lawyer led the way to a block separate from the main prison buildings where another guard directed them to a small room and asked them to wait while James was brought from his cell. The room was bare except for a small table and several chairs.

"I'll leave you alone to talk with him," Jega said. "When you're finished I'll discuss his case with him. We have 30 minutes."

Scott was nodding his head in agreement when the door opened and James was ushered into the room by a guard. The lawyer shook his client's hand, said something to him and walked outside. Scott motioned his son to take a chair on the opposite side of the table from where he was sitting.

"How was Sarah?" James asked, without greeting his father.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you anything positive. Her doctor said she only had a short time to live."

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed. "My daughter's dying and I can't see her."

"I'll ask Jega to apply for bail on compassionate grounds."

"He tried to get the Attorney General's office to agree to my release to visit Sarah after I told him she was critically ill but they refused. He said he would make a formal application to a judge but did not think it would be successful."

"I'll talk to him and see if there is any way I can help by offering a guarantee of your return to Singapore or whatever they might require."

James had not looked directly at his father since he entered the room. Now he fixed his gaze on him.

"Why are you taking this interest in me now - after all the things you said two years ago?" He asked.

"Because Sarah is my grand-daughter and you are still my son, despite changing your name." Scott paused, before adding: "And because I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? You are not responsible for this mess I'm in."

“No,” Scott agreed. “I’m sorry for all the stupid and hurtful things I said. I still don’t have an inkling of how or why you came to make such a cataclysmic change in your life, with its shattering impact on those around you. And I may never be clear about it. But I am learning to live with it and now know I should have been more rational in my response and less offensive in my language.”

“Do you believe that I’m innocent?”

“I would like to believe it.”

“I know it looks bad. But the thought of inviting that young man to my room never entered my head. I am going through a very difficult period in my life, searching for my real identity at the same time as I’m distressed by the pain I have caused Erika and the effect my actions may have on the children. In particular, I have been agonising over Sarah.

“Because she was seriously ill, I wasn’t keen to go to Singapore but Barney Marks, the chief executive, thought it was important that Bennelong, now it is more involved in South-East Asia through our regional partner, had full representation at this year’s Asian Advertising Convention in the island republic. And he particularly wanted me to be there. When you and I last met in Singapore I secured the agreement of Bugis Advertising to establish a partnership with Bennelong. Maurice Meckleson, the executive who travelled to Singapore with me, later claimed that I had screwed up my presentation and it was only through his intervention that our visit was a success. A little over a year later Barney learned over a golf match with the managing director of Bugis that I didn’t screw up and it was my presentation that sealed the deal. Barney blasted Meckleson, moved him sideways to director of marketing and gave me his job. So, of course, it was important that I attend the convention. The program was quite hectic and I had to put up with sniping from Meckleson during roundtable discussions when he should have been providing support as a Bennelong representative. Of course, he was livid when I was given his previous job, so our relationship is prickly to say the least.

“Anyway, on the last day of the convention, the Australian delegates decided to go to a Chinese restaurant that is a popular dining place with expatriates and visitors from Australia. I was extremely tired and after dinner I just wanted to get back to my hotel room and go to bed. I fell asleep and was woken up by police charging into my room.”

“If anyone can get you out of this jam, Jega can,” Scott said, standing up. “I’ll step outside now so he can talk to you. If he thinks there is anything I can do to help, I’ll do it.”

He held out his hand and, after hesitating, James took it. “Thank you,” he said.

Chapter Thirty-Four

May 5, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

I had presumed all my emotions had been paralysed by the hammering they have taken over the past few years but I was deeply disquieted by my visit to James at the Queenstown Remand Prison. Seeing our son in that grim place starkly underlined for me the horrific prospect facing him of several years in prison and the demeaning punishment of being caned. The question of his homosexuality no longer weighed large in my mind. I was conscious only of the pain he was going through - especially, the agony of not being able to visit Sarah. For the first time in two years, I was again seeing him as a father. And for a father it is devastating to know you are powerless to help a son who is in serious trouble.

This evidence of a new compassion was enhanced by an email sent to me by Catherine containing portions of a message she had received from James before his trip to Singapore and the events leading to his arrest. In it he said that in addressing an area of his life that needed attention he had opened up a new set of challenges as imposing as anything he had previously faced.

“I don’t have any illusions about discovering happiness, Catherine,” he said. “I’m still just trying to find myself. When you don’t fit in where you are supposed to, it takes time to find out where you do fit in. In effect you lose your identity. Previously, my life had a particular direction. Now, it still has to find a new one. Without this, I find myself mourning the loss of my old life. Merely coping with this change takes most of my energy. Most of my old social life, daily activities and way of thinking do not exist anymore so I am searching for a new stability and familiarity . The difference between the way I used to live and the way I am living now is immense and it will take time for me to I make a complete adjustment.

“The children, for their part, seem to have adjusted to the fact that their father is no longer living in the same house as them and their mother. But I don’t think I will ever forgive myself for having changed their lives in such a profound way. I am still looking for meaning and direction in the things that I do, filtering the important from the meaningless, looking for inspiration, all the time wondering ‘why’.”

The question of how the children are coping has been much on my mind. At the time he wrote to Catherine, James was remarking only on how they were standing up to the fact that he had moved out of their home. Now, on top of that, the family is facing the strain of Sarah’s illness and the likely tragedy of her death. If James is convicted of sodomy with a minor and jailed for a number of years, Linda and Paul will have to be told at some point what has happened to their father. For now, Erika is saying he’s working on a special project in Singapore that will keep him out of Australia for a month or two. If he manages to escape a prison sentence the children will eventually become aware - either through being told by James or someone else - that their father is gay. I wonder how they will deal with this. Linda, who is a very mature 12, already seems to have worked out the essence of the situation. She said her mother told her James had “gone weird”.

“I think she meant he’s gay,” she said, to my surprise.

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

Linda shrugged. "I just hope I can still see him a lot, now he and Mum are living apart."

She seems to be taking it all in her stride. I am more worried about Paul. How does a boy react to discovering his father has left his mother because he would rather have a man as his partner than a woman. Will it influence him in any way as he enters his adolescence and experiences sexual feelings? Since I do not know the answer I am more disturbed about this aspect of James's search for his identity than any other.

But I now tell myself that I must look at the issues more rationally and more coolly because events will take their course regardless of what I do or say and I should at least try to maintain a relationship of sorts with both my son and grandson.

So far, my worst fears about how the children might be affected by the turbulence in their lives have not eventuated. They have been surprisingly unruffled. During my meetings with Linda and Paul while I was in Sydney to see Sarah, I came to the conclusion that they had adjusted not only to the separation of their parents, as their father noted, but also to the serious illness of their sister. They were saddened by Sarah's condition and unhappy with the separation of their mother and father but did not appear to have developed any severe neuroses as a result. Paul said he missed his Dad but that was the normal perspective of a child who has not seen his father for a few weeks. They have proved to be more adaptable than their grandfather, making me see that I must take my cue from them in order to preserve what is left of our family, even if it is no longer the "perfect" unit that I wanted it to be.

I believe also that, despite my qualms about the ramifications of James "coming out", I should do my best to remain close to Linda and Paul to counteract the fierce denigration of their father by Erika's mother. I see now that it is more important for them to respect and love their father than to regard him as a villain. Fortunately, while Erika may be angry, even bitter, she has not reached the stage of vilifying the man she married in front of their children.

During my visit to James in Queenstown Remand Prison, he asked me if I thought he was guilty. I could not give him a straight answer. He insists he is innocent. During our fraught meeting in Singapore two years earlier I had warned him of the local laws prohibiting homosexual activities. But I cannot imagine that having spent time in Singapore on business for Bennelong he was not aware of this and the tougher penalties in cases where minors were involved and would therefore be careful how he conducted himself. Nevertheless, the evidence against him seems overwhelming.

However, I will stand by him and provide whatever assistance I can.

All my love,

John

Chapter Thirty-Five

A clamour in Scott's ear woke him up and he reached for the alarm clock before he realised the noise was his telephone ringing. Sitting up, he lifted the receiver and at the same time saw it was 9.30. He was annoyed that he had slept so long. He had planned to get up at 7 and go to the Lake Club for a swim. But the stress of seeing his sick grand-daughter and talking to his jailed son, as well as the strain of travelling from Malaysia to Australia and back by way of Singapore, had apparently left him so exhausted that his body had clung to sleep way past the hour it was normally forced to get up.

He hoarsely muttered, "Hello."

"Where have you been?" Siti demanded. "I called several times but only got your answering machine. You didn't tell me you were going away."

"I didn't think you would be interested. I've been to Singapore and Australia."

"Australia? If I'd known you were going to Australia I would have come with you."

"And stayed with me in my hotel room?"

"Of course not. I have Malaysian friends there. What did you do in Australia and Singapore. I suppose you have old girl friends in Australia and new girl friends in Singapore.

"I went to Australia to see my very ill grand-daughter and I went to Singapore to see my son who is in prison." Scott was too tired to fabricate a lie.

"I'm sorry your grand-daughter is . . ." She stopped speaking for a moment and then asked: "Your son is in prison? What did he do?"

"He's alleged to have sodomised a minor. A young Malay boy."

"John Scott," she exclaimed angrily, "I am not going to speak to you ever again. You are always teasing me or making fun of me and my religion." Her telephone slammed down.

Scott sighed. He was not in the mood to call Siti back and tell her he was telling her the truth. It would take some explaining. And he had more important things on his mind. On the flight from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur the previous night he had racked his brain without success to find some way to help his son. In the meantime, he had to give some consideration to a problem he had found waiting for him in Malaysia. Yusuf had left a message on his answering machine advising him that the youth wing of UMNO had accused him and three other foreign journalists of sedition and called on police to take action against them. Sedition, a charge commonly used against enemies of the government, carried a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment. Scott believed the move was aimed at intimidating correspondents based in Malaysia, but even if the authorities' intention was not to throw him and his colleagues into jail it might prompt zealous officers to summon him to a police station for a time-wasting interrogation. He was no longer prepared to put up with that kind of harassment, which he had experienced in other Asian countries during his long career, and resolved that he would end his sojourn in Malaysia and return to Australia if the matter

was pursued.

It had arisen from reports of a violent racial clash in a poor area of Kuala Lumpur. His article had been quite factual but the Malaysian government preferred to keep problems arising from its mixture of Malays, Chinese and Indians hidden from the outside world. It wanted to portray an image of a harmonious country which tourists, overseas competitors in sporting events and foreign business people could visit without reservations. Denying that the incident was “racial”, the Prime Minister said it was merely a disturbance between Malays and Indians. On the one hand, he was conceding the participants happened to be people of different races while, on the other, he was saying this did not make it a racial clash. Denial was a common approach of officials to calamities. When a thick haze caused by smoke from Indonesian forest fires descended on Malaysia and sent the pollution index to dangerous levels, the authorities stopped giving daily figures, causing even more public alarm. Two killer diseases struck the country in consecutive years but only limited information was supplied to the media, which was cautioned not to highlight the dangers of the epidemics.

However, Scott chided himself, it was not only governments that sought to escape from unpalatable facts by declining to give them credence. He had been in a state of denial over James’s homosexuality for two years. Finally, he was facing up to the reality that his son, whom he had refused to believe could be anything but heterosexual, was, in truth, gay. He did not like it, he did not understand it but he had to accept that it was so.

As Scott shaved, showered and scrambled an egg for his breakfast he mulled over the chances of his son disproving the charge against him with increasing despondency. Then, while he was carrying his empty plate and a tea mug to the kitchen, the telephone rang again. He put the dishes in the sink, walked quickly to the room he used as an office and answered the call.

“Hi, John,” Peter Lee said “I thought you might be interested in what I uncovered on a trip to Johor Baru yesterday.”

“You went to JB?”

“Yes, I decided to track down the family of Hassan Aziz. I found them living in a kampung on the outskirts of the city. I met his father and mother. There are six other children, besides Hassan. He’s the oldest. His father said Hassan was a good boy who sent money to them regularly. He told his parents he had a job in a factory. Two days after Hassan was arrested, his father received an envelope mailed from Singapore containing 350 dollars - Singapore dollars. It included a note from his son saying he had received a bonus from his boss. My guess is it was money given to him before he was found in the hotel room with your son. He must have posted it before the rendezvous on his way to the hotel. He could have bought an envelope and stamps at an all-night store. Only three days earlier he had sent 50 dollars to his parents. So this was a new payment. Say he kept 100 dollars for himself and 50 dollars to give to a room boy to open the door. The rest he sent to JB. That was a hell of a lot of money for a street kid. The top going rate, I discovered from a police contact, is 200 dollars and Hassan probably wouldn’t ask for more than a hundred.”

“So what are saying?”

“If you were planning to invite a prostitute to your room, you would normally negotiate the price. Hassan wasn’t smart enough to ask for more than the going rate. So that would be the amount you would give him. However, someone paid him around 500 dollars. That means, to begin with, the person did not know the going rate; and, secondly, he wanted to be sure Hassan turned up. He also had plenty of money to splash around. Was your son free with his money?”

“Definitely not. He’s always been very frugal. And he can’t afford to throw his money away now he’s separated from his wife and has to provide for her and the children and rent a place for himself.”

“Your son says he was ‘set up’. Although my police contact wasn’t able to tell me how much Hassan was paid - the youth would certainly keep that to himself - he gave me another useful piece of information. He said the prosecution had got from Hassan a piece of paper with James’s room number and a time written on it. If we accept your son’s assertion that he was framed, then we might deduce from this that someone passed to Hassan a pile of dollars and a note steering him to James’s room. Someone who did it for a prank or who had a more malicious intention.”

“But wouldn’t it be risky for our mystery person to hand Hassan such a large amount of money in advance. He might take it and not turn up.”

“Hassan is a fairly simply young person. I think anyone meeting him for the first time could see right away that he was unlikely to have a devious mind and would be more inclined to do everything he could to develop a continuing relationship with a new seemingly-rich client.”

“My God,” Scott exclaimed excitedly. “There’s enough in what you say to bust the prosecution’s case.”

“Hold on, John. The police will simply state that the defendant was an ignorant Australian who paid more than he should have. They’ll reject your contention that he needed to be careful with his money and argue that he was too drunk to make a considered financial judgement.”

Deflated, Scott asked: “What can we do.”

“Try to get more information about what happened that night. You might try to talk anyone who was with him.”

“Okay. A group of advertising people from the convention he was attending had dinner together at a Chinese restaurant. I’ll ask Jega to find out from James the name of someone who went to the restaurant and would be willing to talk to me.”

“Let me know how you get on. Meanwhile, I’ll see what else I can find out about Hassan.”

“Thanks very much for your efforts, Peter.”

“I’m happy to help if I can.” the Singapore journalist said. “Besides,” he added with a laugh, “if your son was set up it will make a hell of a good story.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

May 7, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

I should know, as a journalist, that making judgements with limited information is unwise. But I was prepared to believe that James had committed the offence with which he is charged on the basis of the initial facts presented by the prosecution. Now it seems that his claim that he is innocent may turn out to be correct, following information uncovered by my Singapore journalist friend Peter Lee, who took the trouble to go to the home of the Malay youth in the case.

I should have kept in mind the Anwar trials, which not only raised serious questions about the Malaysian justice system but also left me wondering how many - if any - of the several allegations of sexual impropriety made against the former deputy prime minister in the media before he appeared in court were true. Many of the reported indiscretions were never referred to again. He was prosecuted for a single offence of sodomy despite being charged initially with five counts. The government-supporting newspapers printed columns of accusations contained in police documents, which were never tested in court.

In Anwar's first trial on a relatively minor corruption offence, the prosecution spent weeks eliciting sordid testimony about an alleged love-nest where the defendant was said to have engaged in sexual liaisons with both men and women. The "evidence" included the introduction in court of a "semen-stained mattress", from which a government witness claimed to have obtained DNA samples matching Anwar and others. But then the prosecution amended the charges, eliminating the need for it to prove the trysts took place and removing any opportunity for the defence to refute the allegations, which had been reported in length in the media. The judge declared that the reams of transcribed testimony on the supposedly busy sex life of the defendant were now irrelevant and struck them from the record. Anwar was nevertheless found guilty of corruption.

Subsequently, in his sodomy trial, the prosecution was allowed to change the date of the alleged transgression after the defence had produced an alibi for that particular day. It was altered again when government counsel discovered that the apartment where the liaison was supposed to have taken place had not been completed at the specified time. This astounding juggling of dates was only one dodgy aspect of the government case. It was so flawed that it should have been thrown out at an early stage of the proceedings. As a juror in such circumstances I would have had no hesitation in voting for a not guilty verdict. But the jury system has been abolished in Malaysia so it was left to a single judge to deliberate on a host of contentious issues.

Anwar was so popular that many people refused to believe the allegations made against him and accepted his claim that he was the victim of a political conspiracy. But the reputation of a person without his kind of standing with the public can be destroyed for life by unsubstantiated accusations given wide publicity, even if they are later shown to be false. I have always strongly

opposed any action taken by judges or lawyers to prevent publication of the names of people charged with offences. It is a conviction of mine that in our democratic system the full details of every person brought before a court be published in order that no one by virtue of wealth or influence obtains a privilege that is not available to others. As always where the law is concerned justice must not only be done but also be seen to be done. Additionally, it has a deterrent effect by giving the public notice that people breaking the law face the prospect of being shamed before their community and of ruining their careers. At the same time, publishing the names of established criminals ensures they have less chance of committing the same offences again.

Accordingly, I cannot, in all honesty, gripe about the publicity already given to the allegations against James. Rather I must urgently unearth the true facts of the case in order to have it withdrawn as soon as possible to clear his name. It is uncommon for the media to give equal coverage and presentation to both allegations against someone and their rebuttal or to the prosecution of a person and his or her acquittal. And, unfortunately, even when this does occur members of the public will continue to associate individuals with the accusations against them rather than the fact they were found to be false. Nevertheless, the sooner the matter is ended the less damage will be done to James's reputation and career.

I believe we must find sufficiently convincing evidence to have the case dropped before formal proceedings begin. If it goes to trial, James will not be facing a jury of his peers but a member of the Singapore judiciary, which has a reputation for toughness. Singapore, like Kuala Lumpur, has dispensed with juries so a barrister has the harder task of presenting the case for the defence to a lone, solemn figure on the bench rather than to representatives of the public, who might examine his arguments with less legal rigidity. Jurors are more inclined to see defendants as fellow citizens and evaluate their transgressions with their own imperfections in mind. Many judges see themselves as guardians of law and order and impose their own perception of community values, which can be significantly different from the man in the street. And in countries without juries, judges have an exalted and powerful position.

However, I was not thinking along these lines a day earlier when I called Catherine from Singapore to let her know I had seen James. I told her the case against him was strong, prompting her to say I could not possibly doubt his innocence.

"It's ridiculous," she said. "I hope you're not still thinking that because he's gay he must be chasing under-age boys. That is not the James I know. I can assure you of that."

I did not say anything. I could not bring myself to tell our daughter about my realisation that I may have been judging James on the basis of my own predilection for young women in my early years in Asia and, in particular, the episode involving Kartika. But I had not heard from Peter Lee at that stage and could not square in my mind James's profession of innocence with the prosecution case against him. So I just said I hoped she was right

Now, of course, I see that I should not have prejudged James's case. So I will direct my efforts to building upon the facts uncovered by Peter to obtain enough information that will see him freed. We have a difficult task ahead of us to prove his innocence to the satisfaction of the prosecution, according to James's lawyer, to whom I talked after Peter told me what he had discovered. I asked

Jega to get from James the name of a friend in Bennelong as a starting point for trying to find someone who was with him on the night of the incident that led to his arrest and might remember something that will help us.

I telephoned the Westmead hospital and managed to talk to Erika, who is now staying there day and night to be with Sarah. The child's condition is steadily deteriorating and she requires increasing doses of morphine to ease her pain.

It is a tragedy that James cannot be there with her too.

All my love,

John
