

## Letters To My Late Wife

### Part Two

#### Chapter Twelve

Tape-recorded and transcribed September 25, 1998

M. In the early years of your marriage did you ever think of ending your relationship with Erika?

J. Never. Because it was like a family situation. We could share everything. I was never able to do that with anybody before. So we were very close. I should have said we shared almost everything. Ironically, the one thing I wanted to share I couldn't share but there was never a question of me being unhappy. Gradually, however, I was learning more about the gay side of the world I lived in and it was causing me to pay more attention to the sexual yearning that had been with me throughout my teen years.

I started to read about homosexuality and, for the first time, really appreciate that there were many people with my feelings who were part of a gay community. There were men who were exclusively interested in men, as I was, and what I experienced as a teenager wasn't just a teenage stage but was characteristic of people who were described as gay. So I started to wake up to the fact that there were gay people and I might be one of them.

M. Was this a result of casual reading or deliberate research?

J. A bit of both. And there were little things, like television shows featuring gay people. I remember watching this sitcom one evening when Erika was out with friends. I was transfixed by the way these two guys danced around each other in a metaphorical sense and eventually came together and, then, actually kissed. My heart was pounding. It was the most amazing emotional experience of my life to that time. I remember thinking, "What the hell is this? What's going on here." My sexual fantasies were being played out on a sitcom millions of people were watching and it was largely being taken for granted.

M. What effect did this have on your relations with your wife?

J. None, at first. But I indulged my homosexuality in small ways even while being married to Erika. At one stage, we lived in an apartment where our bedroom window faced the bedroom window of an apartment in the next building. I noticed that the tenant was a man who went to bed at the same time every night, half an hour or so earlier than us. So I used to find some excuse to go into our bedroom, while Erika was reading or watching TV, and watch him undress.

As I started to read more about homosexuality, I realised that all the signs were there - in me. But I also believed that, in some ways, I was different. I went to a couple of gay bars in Oxford Street but felt out of place. I remember thinking they were all very camp and over the top and I was not like that so I couldn't be gay. But this conflict within me only made me more determined to discover my true identity. All the information I was acquiring, together with the impact it was

having on my emotions, finally overwhelmed me to the point where I allowed myself to look at men and enjoy it, rather than being embarrassed. I also made a conscious decision to experience a homosexual relationship. My idea was not to end my marriage but to be able to say at the end of my life that, at least, I had that one experience. But I found that once you cross that threshold, there's no turning back.

For as long as I can remember, I used to have this recurring dream of lying in bed with another man in my arms - sometimes it was someone I knew and sometimes it was a person created by my imagination - and I would wake with the pleasure of it still strong in my mind. I continued to have the dream after I was married but when I woke up and found Erika beside me I was depressed.

Then, one night, I was having the dream and the person in it was someone I knew and when I came out of it he was lying there beside me. That had a powerful impact upon me, like a revelation. It was the tangible manifestation of a longing that had been searching for expression all those teenage years. Since then, I have no longer had that dream.

M. Once you had made the dream come true you no longer needed it.

J. Yes. But I didn't consciously set out to make it come true. It came true as a result of my decision to try to meet somebody with whom I could have a homosexual experience. It took a long time, two or three years, but finally, I met somebody in Hong Kong on a trip there and went back to his room. The first time I was with him there wasn't any sex but I stayed the night with him. It was wonderful just to be wrapped in his arms.

When I came back home from that trip I was still elated from the fulfilment of my dream and the blissful moment of being in bed with another man. But I convinced myself that now I had gone through this experience that would be the end of it and I would go on with my marriage. However, that wasn't the case at all, of course, because the experience had been so overpowering. On my first night back home, Erika and I went to a movie and although it wasn't especially moving I cried all the way through it. She was bewildered, and when we were sitting in the car asked me why I was affected by a very ordinary film. Finally I told her about my "affair" in Hong Kong and she began weeping and couldn't stop.

M. Was she angry?

J. Not then. It was extremely difficult for me to get the words out. And when I told her and she finally grasped what I was saying she was obviously flabbergasted. If she had ever had worries that I might be unfaithful, it was clear they had never included the possibility that the other person would be a man.

Seeing her so completely bewildered, I was overcome with remorse and wanted somehow to undo what I had done. If there had been a pill to make me "straight" I would have taken it because at that time my life at home was vitally important.

After we had both cried for a week, she said we should get counselling and since she was a Catholic she wanted Christian counselling. I said okay because I wanted to solve the problem and

make it go away. So off we went to see these people, who said the answer was prayer. Their message was that if I sincerely wanted to get rid of this “thing” I could. I didn’t believe that was possible and have since discovered that many people would agree with me. So the Catholic counselling didn’t really help me at all. Erika was attracted to the notion that I could cure myself with prayer and was increasingly upset with me for not making the attempt.

M. Did she say or you say, “We should end our marriage?”

J. Not then. I decided I should stay and try to solve the problem in my head. I didn’t think about leaving at that time. I just thought, “I’m glad I told her and maybe it’s over and let’s soldier on.” And then, of course, I saw this guy a couple more times on other trips. I didn’t tell her about that but put it all down in a diary, in which I described my delight and excitement at this new sexual experience and questioned how it could be wrong when it felt so good. And then one night, when I was out, she broke into my brief case and read my diary. It was a disaster, a nightmare. I was staggered by this huge invasion of privacy as well as the fact that she now knew everything. Friends have said it was stupid to write about such intimate matters in a diary but it was all so wonderful to me that I had to give expression to my emotions.

M. What prompted her to open the bag?

J. I don’t know. She must have suspected something. I think when you are very close to someone you can sense when something is wrong.

M. What happened between you then?

J. She confronted me angrily. Called me all sorts of things. I said that I’d better move out and I did. When I told my male friend that I’d left my wife, he promptly left me. He didn’t want anything to do with me now that I was “single”.

All this happened as I was being considered for promotion in the agency. The chief executive was apparently impressed with my work. I needed to be even more on the ball than usual at a time when my home life was falling apart. A hell of a situation.

I didn’t know what to do with myself. Friends put me up for a while. Then I met a guy and we liked each other so he promptly took me to his place where I stayed for about a week. I woke up one morning and said to myself, “What the hell am I doing here? I need to be home with my children and my family.” I asked Erika to take me back and she agreed. Right away I returned to the house.

M. You’re still there?

J. Yes. I don’t know for how long.

M. That is something you will decide as you continue your journey of self-discovery.

J. Yes, I suppose so. In the meantime, I’ve been charged with convincing a Singapore agency that

our two companies should cooperate regionally. I'm travelling to Singapore tonight - unfortunately with an executive I don't like. My father is flying from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore to meet me tomorrow and I'm dreading the prospect of seeing him and trying to explain what has been happening in my life.

M. When you said you never told anyone about your sexual feelings, that included your parents?

J. Yes.

M. Did you ever think of confiding in them?

J. Never. I had a tremendous fear of dad ever finding out because that would be like the end of the world.

M. Was this constantly on your mind?

J. Yes. I worried about my father finding out. I worried about anybody finding out. I was always hiding the reality. Nobody must learn my secret. It was just ridiculous. I felt increasingly lonely and isolated. These days it's easier to be gay. When I talk to young guys, they express none of the anxieties that afflicted me. But back in the 70s, people who outed themselves as gay were not as readily accepted as today's homosexuals.

M. So you presented yourself as a heterosexual male?

J. Yes. And even until recently I found myself going along with the homophobia of some of the people I work with. Many of the guys make jokes about gay men in the advertising community. I have always laughed with them and then at some point it occurred to me that I was being hypocritical. Here I was laughing with them at my own sexuality. My desire to be liked was overriding my desire to be who I really was. But I guess it's a normal human trait. I was trying to be accepted in their world. And with the older men, I think I saw something of my father and did not want to be rejected by them.

M. That's probably right. You're reaching a better understanding of yourself. And you seem a little more relaxed.

J. But I'm still scared shitless about this meeting with my father in Singapore. I don't know how to deal with it, especially after receiving an incredibly unsympathetic letter from him.

M. Just let it happen. I think you can handle it. You and your father have to work your way through this. Be yourself. The time has passed for you to try to be what he wants you to be.

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Scott sat on the second-storey balcony of the 60-year-old house, sipping a beer and staring out at the thick branches of a banyan tree, his mind sedated for a moment by his surroundings. The loudest sound was the staccato cry of a brightly-coloured bird. Except for the low background hum of traffic he could have been in any rural corner of South-East Asia. But, in fact, he was only a fifteen-minute walk from the busy Orchard Road shopping centre of Singapore. The residence was situated together with other black-and-whites, as expatriate homes built during British rule were called, in a thickly-wooded diplomatic enclave off Tanglin Road, where the hubbub of the city seemed to have been filtered out by the foliage. The peaceful setting - there was no noise from the adjacent homes apart from the occasional bark of a dog - gave him the sense of being back in the Sembawang house that had been his Singapore residence for three and a half years.

It had been a lucky find. For the first year, he had lived in a small ground-floor apartment near the Newton MRT station, with a ceiling that transmitted every sound from the premises above, including the screams and mad dashing-about of a small boy, whose working parents left him in the care of a disinterested servant during the day. The noise overhead aggravated the stress he was under from moving out of his home in Sydney, where he had expected to spend the rest of his days, and relocating himself in Singapore. The need to find something quieter was underscored by the fact he worked out of his place of residence.

Responding to a newspaper advertisement, he met a middle-aged Chinese man at the site of the house. He knew at first sight it was perfect for him, although it was run-down and dirty. It was a single-storey bungalow in the centre of a grassed rectangle, backing onto a government reserve that included an airforce base. It was owned by the uncle of the man who showed it to Scott. Some members of the family wanted the old bungalow replaced by a town-house, which would sharply raise the property's value. But the patriarch, a Mr Loke, was opposed to this for reasons he had not disclosed to his nephew and had issued instructions for a tenant to be found for the place. But not any tenant would do. Scott had to be personally vetted by the owner, which involved going to an old back-packers hotel in Bencoolen Street. As he walked into the open, paved courtyard, where Europeans and Americans in shorts and sandals milled about waiting to be assigned rooms or to check out, it was like stepping back into the past before the island of Singapore became an economic dynamo, jammed with high-rise apartment blocks, commercial buildings, and luxury hotels run by international chains. Scott realised that if the owner was prepared to sit on a prime piece of land in the centre of Singapore without turning it into a money-making office block or top-class accommodation, it was not so surprising that he was unwilling to upgrade his Sembawang property. Perhaps, he had a nostalgic attachment to both places or, like Scott, he had an aversion to change.

A woman at the reception counter asked Scott to sit on a plastic chair in the courtyard while she fetched the owner. After about 15 minutes, she returned with a Chinese man in his seventies, dressed in undershorts, a singlet and sandals. It was the casual attire of Chinese males in their homes in Singapore and Hong Kong but not usually seen in the foyer of a hotel. The woman introduced Scott and, speaking first in English for the benefit of the visitor and then in Chinese for her employer, said he had been sent by Mr Loke's nephew. The hotel keeper nodded his head and said something in reply. Scott, who spoke a little Mandarin, recognised the Hokkien dialect, which was used widely in Singapore. With the woman translating, the prospective tenant was subjected to a long interrogation. Mr Loke showed little interest in Scott's answers until, in response to a

question about whether he was married or single, he replied that his wife had died in an accident some years earlier.

“Really?” Mr Loke asked, sitting up and looking more closely at Scott. “I lost my wife too. Do you miss her?”

“Yes, very much.”

The older man nodded empathetically. “She was Australian, like you?”

“No. She was Chinese. From Indonesia.”

This made Mr Loke stare at Scott with even more interest.

“What part of Indonesia.”

“Surabaya.”

“Is that so? Maybe we are related by marriage. I have relatives in Surabaya.”

“Her family name was Tan.”

“Oh, then we are not related. But I know some Tans in Surabaya. Good family.” He paused before asking: “When would you like to move into the house?”

So the deal was sealed and Scott had a quiet corner of Singapore to which he could retreat when he was not attending press conferences and official functions or travelling to another country. His colleagues thought he was crazy living so far from the central business district but it was ideal for the solitary man he had become with no interests apart from his work and keeping fit through a daily swimming regimen. It was not far from one of Singapore’s clean public pools.

He wished he was still living there. While he had not considered any place where he had stayed since the death of his wife a real home, he had been more contented in the cottage and garden he had rented in the northern part of the island than in his apartment in Kuala Lumpur. He had fallen into a routine in Singapore that had slowly been giving himself a sense of future beyond the death of his wife. But he had been forced to move to Malaysia when the Singapore Government refused to extend his residence permit.

For a moment his annoyance at having to shift his base to Kuala Lumpur returned. But there was as little point in dwelling on the recent past as in yearning for his lost life in Australia with his late wife. Those days were gone forever and now he must summon the will to overcome the anxiety gripping him as he waited for his son.

He had decided to go ahead with the meeting despite Anwar’s arrest having prompted wide international interest and Scott’s newspaper wanting him to file daily on every aspect of the story. The former deputy prime minister had been arrested under the Internal Security Act, which meant

he could be held almost indefinitely without charge or trial. But Scott had reasoned that because of Anwar's status and popular support and calls by foreign governments for Malaysia to justify his arrest the government would have to bring him to court. At first, he worried that this might interfere with his proposed get-together with his son in Singapore. But when several days passed without any hints or rumours of a court appearance by Anwar, he opted to carry out his plan, gambling that the former deputy prime minister would be held incommunicado until the following week at least. He sent an update on the Anwar affair to the paper early on Friday afternoon before driving to the airport to catch a flight to Singapore.

On his arrival in Singapore, he left a message for James at the Traders. His son had returned his call when he reached the hotel and confirmed he would join his father at the Argosy house the next day. They had spoken only briefly because James said he was tired and going to bed but Scott had sensed a disquiet between them.

So now he was seated beneath a slowly-turning ceiling fan on a rattan couch with tropical-bright, flower-patterned cushions, waiting for his son to arrive for a lunch of chicken, ham, bread rolls and salad, which Maria had prepared and laid out on the table in front of him. It was a milieu in which he would normally have been relaxed and contented, reminding him of a time when he was a young Reuter correspondent and had first experienced the gracious lifestyle of the expatriate community in colonial Singapore and Malaya. But on this day the agreeable atmosphere could not ease the tension that was building in him as the moment approached for the meeting he had sought and now faced with foreboding.

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## Chapter Fourteen

September 26, 1998

My dearest Siu Mei,

One of my fondest memories of James is when he was four and we were waiting with Catherine to cross a street in Hong Kong. Catherine was jumping around waiting for the pedestrian "Walk" sign and my permission to leave the footpath so she could make a dash for the restaurant to which we were heading. But her brother stood beside me and took my hand, placing his trust in me to lead him safely to the other side.

Some 30 years on, that trust had been replaced by a wariness. When I met my adult son in the house of a friend in Singapore, he did not offer his hand to me and his eyes shifted about uneasily. Hearing the servant direct him to the second floor, I had stood up and waited for him at the top of the stairs. I was stunned by his appearance. The light that had always seemed to shine from his face was no longer there. He looked pale and ill at ease and seemed to have lost weight. More disturbingly, he no longer had the air of self-assurance and being in control of his destiny that had instilled in me a belief that he would always be there - as a rock-solid source of strength and support - when you or I needed him.

“Hello, Dad,” he said.

I waved a hand towards the table. “Maria has laid out some food for us.”

I sat down at the table and James took a chair opposite me. “I’m not hungry,” he said.

“Well, tell me what’s going on. Everybody seems to have known about your mid-life crisis or lifestyle change or whatever is happening to you for months now except me.”

“It’s not a lifestyle change or mid-life crisis. It’s a discovery of who I really am.” He paused and for a moment seemed to have difficulty in speaking. “Because I always felt a need to conform with society and my parents’ wishes I’ve gone a long way down a path that doesn’t reflect my true identity.”

“The path you’ve chosen now - if it means that you are proclaiming yourself to be homosexual rather than heterosexual - can only bring misery to your family, estrange you from most of your fellow humans and endanger your career.”

“I wish there was some way in which I could have avoided involving you in my search for identity but you were bound to find out eventually. I always knew you would never understand what I was going through or would blame yourself for a missing ingredient in my upbringing.”

“I don’t blame myself for anything. I just think you are making a disastrous mistake in trying to change your identity, as you call it, in this particular fashion at this time of your life. I could abide you deciding to chuck in your job and go off to contemplate your navel on top of a mountain. That’s the sort of thing people do when life becomes too much for them. Self-indulgent escapism is only too common. But choosing to become gay - that’s an absolutely crazy idea.”

“I didn’t choose to become gay.”

“One minute you are heterosexual - married to a loving woman and the father of three beautiful children - and the next minute you are - so everyone tells me - homosexual. If that’s not choice, I don’t know what it is.”

“My homosexuality has always been there - as long as I can remember. But since it was something that was taboo, it was more important for me as a young man to be seen to be doing the right thing rather than what was right for me. Homosexuals faced the threat of criminal prosecution in addition to being stigmatised and rejected by society. These consequences were so frightening I fought against the feelings that were growing within me.”

“Homosexuals may no longer be taken to court in Australia but they face prosecution here in Singapore and you should keep this in mind before you’re tempted to find yourself some male companionship,” I said. “I must tell you that although I consider myself a liberal and broad-minded person, this abnormal behaviour is absolutely abhorrent to me.”

I could see that James was shaken by my remark but I pressed on because I was upset and



frustrated. I had always looked forward to my meetings with him in the years following your death, deriving pleasure from them and experiencing an empathy with my son. But now there was a strain between us. I had intended to be cool and calm and not say anything provocative. But I was confused and angry with him for not being the James I had always believed him to be and for not giving me the sense of security that used to flow from him.

“Homosexuality is an aberration. While most western societies now tolerate the practice between consenting adults, it is a deviation from the social norm and from the sexual preference of the predominant body of humans, which brings men and women together as part of the procreation process. I cannot accept that what you are going through is anything more than something conjured up by your mind as a result of stress and that you are imagining that you had homosexual tendencies in your childhood as part of this mental disorder.”

James leaned forward, his hands gripped tightly in front of him on the table. “You need to appreciate that whether you see this as an aberration or a mental sickness, I had no choice in the matter. Many times in my teens and early twenties I would break down and ask, ‘Why me? Why can’t I be normal? Why do I have to be different?’ To be part Asian never really bothered me but these ‘deviant’ feelings inside me were extremely difficult to live with. So I rejected them, acted as I was expected to and tried to get on with my life. But over the years, they steadily grew stronger and now I find myself in a situation where I must deal with them.”

James took a deep breath. “The struggle I am going through is enormous. I have been in and out of depression and cried many times through the night for months trying to come to terms with who I am. I feel like an evil criminal wreaking havoc on my little family and I take all the blame. I have seen counsellors, read books and attempted to broaden my knowledge about human sexuality. I am not looking for sympathy but simply trying to show you that what I am going through cannot be dismissed as a self-indulgent whim. Your suggestion that I have a choice in the matter deeply offends and angers me.”

Part of me pitied him but I was dismayed by his persistence in insisting he had always been gay.

“I’m sorry if I have made you angry. But it angers me that you are abdicating your responsibility to your family. This has already been a blow to Erika. Imagine what an impact it will have on the children when they discover that their father has not only deserted them but become a homosexual.”

“I am not abdicating my responsibility to my family. I’m particularly aware of my responsibility as a father. The children are my top priority and I want the very best for them. If it’s not to be found in my union with their mother, then I’ll have to find another way. Now that I’m finally confronting what was once unacceptable to me, I need to live my life without deception or hypocrisy.

“In digging deep within myself to find values that I can hold on to, I have discovered that self-respect, integrity, truth and honesty are closest to my heart. These are concepts that I would hope to teach to my children.”

“Including the shocking truth - if it is true - that their father is gay?”

“They should know that the truth can be painful and to avoid it may lead to greater pain in the long run. This is a transition period in which everyone will need to exercise patience and understanding.”

“It is all beyond my understanding. And it would be even more incomprehensible to your mother, I am sure. Perhaps, as I said in my letter to you, it is better that she is dead than to have to confront this.”

Tears came to James’s eyes and he stood up. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he said. “I must go now. I didn’t expect you to comprehend what I am going through but I hoped I would continue to have your love and respect. That hope seems to be futile.” He paused for a moment, before saying quietly: “To save you from being ashamed of me, I’m adopting mother’s maiden name.”

He turned and walked down the stairs without another word. I was overcome with anguish, as I watched him go but could not bring myself to stop him.

Oh, God, Siu Mei, it was a shattering experience. It left me emotionally exhausted and remorseful that I had been so harsh with him. But he seems absolutely set on following this improbable course he has chosen and there appears to be nothing I can do to make him turn back. I know I must find the courage and strength to face up to the situation but my spirit is at the lowest level it has been since your death.

All my love,

John

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## Chapter Fifteen

When Scott returned to his apartment, on an early Sunday morning flight from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, he found three messages on his answering machine from Siti and one from his friend, Yusof, a senior journalist with Bernama, the national news agency.

Scott decided he was not yet ready to talk to Siti and dialled Yusof’s number.

“You called,” Scott said, when Yusof answered.

“I called to ask you to join me at the Lake Club where I was enjoying the company of three pretty young women.”

“Three, for God’s sake.”

“Yes. See what you miss when you are not around to take my call.”

Scott did not doubt that he would have found the women attractive. He had met a string of Yusof's female friends in his company at the club or in one of the bars of Bangsar, the fashionable drinking and dining area of Kuala Lumpur. They were invariably in their mid to late thirties, intelligent, good-looking and working in such fields as journalism, advertising and public relations. Yusof was eclectic in his taste - his social companions included Chinese, Indians and Malays. They were all markedly more liberal in outlook than most Malaysian women and the Malays among them did not subscribe to the more conservative practices of their fellow Muslims. Yusof himself was Muslim in name only - a religious designation forced upon him, he often pointed out, by the Malaysian constitution, which decreed that all Malays were Muslims at birth. Sitting at his favourite bar in Bangsar with a glass of water in front of him and the whisky he was drinking near Scott's elbow, so the Australian could claim it was his in the event of a raid by the religious vice squad, he would denounce the country's conservative "mullahs". He lived with the gloomy expectation that one day he would be arrested and sent by a sharia court to a detention centre for Islamic indoctrination. His attendance at Geelong Grammar in the Australian state of Victoria had given him an Aussie insouciance, which did not sit well with his more solemn Malaysian peers and had blocked him from appointments to more senior positions with higher salaries. But this did not bother him as long as he could afford to buy his whiskey and the odd bottle of Australian red wine.

On more than one occasion, Scott had been dazzled by a member of Yusof's female circle but his efforts to engage a target of his interest in serious conversation, with a view to a later tryst, invariably ended in failure. Portly, bald and poorly-paid his 52-year-old friend may have been, but he was a magnet for women of all ages. They clustered around him, so entranced by his snippets of gossip and comments on prominent personalities, which were delivered in a mumble reminiscent of Marlon Brando playing the Godfather, that Scott felt like a stranger eavesdropping on the conversation at an adjacent table. He was certain the session at the Lake Club the previous night would have been no different so experienced no pangs about missing it.

"I went to Singapore to see my son," he said.

"You're not still giving him hell over his impending divorce, are you?"

"It's more complicated than that." When Yusof had remarked on his recent despondency, Scott had disclosed that his son was breaking up with his wife but he had been reluctant to tell him the whole story. Now, in the wake of his fruitless visit to Singapore, he needed to talk to someone about his anguish. However, even though Yusof was a close friend, he could not bring himself to tell him that James was gay. Was he embarrassed, he wondered - ashamed to admit that he had a homosexual son? James had suggested as much when he said he was changing his name.

"Let it be," Yusof said. "I gave up trying to control the lives of my son and daughter years ago." Both were in their twenties and living in Australia.

"Have you heard anything new on Anwar - whether he'll be charged soon?" Scott asked, after deciding not to say anything more about his son.

"One of my contacts said he would appear in court tomorrow. But it could be Tuesday. The

government will want to outfox his supporters, who are planning to hold a rally outside the court when he is brought there.”

Scott and Yusof agreed to meet for a drink in Cantina, a Bangsar bar, later in the week.

As soon as Scott put down the receiver the telephone rang and he picked it up again.

“You didn’t return my calls,” Siti said.

“I was in Singapore. As you knew.”

“You always seem to be in Singapore.” This was not true. “You must have a girl-friend there. Is she Chinese? I am sure you like Chinese girls better than Malay girls. But I don’t know how you can go out with Chinese girls. Especially Singapore Chinese girls. They’re just after your money.”

“May I remind you that my late wife was Chinese. And I don’t have any money - in the sense of being rich.”

“I’m not criticising your wife. I am sure we would have got on well together. We could have discussed all your faults.”

“You would have been the best of buddies,” he said with a sarcasm she did not catch. He was partly amused and partly saddened to hear Siti’s anti-Chinese remarks. His wife had been equally racist on the subject of Javanese. But was he any different? He certainly would not openly make the kind of comments that came naturally to his wife and Siti. Yet he distinguished between races and was more accepting of some than others. He also had strong prejudices about religion and, as he had recently discovered, about sexual behaviour. He had always considered himself a tolerant man. But now he was wondering if, behind his facade of objectivity befitting the committed journalist, he was as biased as any other person.

“As I told you when we last talked, my son had business in Singapore, so I went there to meet him,” he said.

“How is he?”

“Okay.” If he was reluctant to tell Yusof that his son had professed himself to be gay, he was absolutely certain that he would not raise the development with Siti, given her comments on homosexuals. The thought prompted him to ask her what was being said among members of parliament and their staff about the arrest of Anwar.

“They are all cowards,” she said. “His old friends have deserted him. They’re afraid that if they support him the PM will smite them too. It’s a plot, like Anwar says, to kill him politically.”

“He tried to kill the PM first, with his push for power. He was the anointed heir and should have waited patiently for the PM to go at a time of his choosing instead of trying to persuade party members to force his resignation.”

“But it is vindictive of the PM to have him arrested under the ISA. And these allegations of sodomy are absurd. Anwar is a pious man, a good Muslim.”

“So people keep telling me. Does anyone in parliament think differently?”

“Oh, some of them are saying they knew all along that he liked young men but that’s just to win favour with the PM,” she replied disdainfully.

“Similar allegations about Anwar were floating around a year ago.”

“Yes and at that time the PM and the police chief rejected them. What’s changed since then?”

“There’s been a power struggle.”

“Exactly.”

Scott paused then asked: “Are you planning to visit me this week?”

“I don’t know. I may. Do you miss me?”

“Of course. But telephone me first to see if I’m home. If Anwar is brought to court I will be there to cover his case.”

“Be sure you tell the truth.”

“I always do.”

When she had said goodbye his thoughts turned again to James. He decided he needed to tell Catherine of the unhappy outcome of his meeting with James in Singapore.

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Chapter Sixteen

September 27

My Dearest Siu Mei,

The crisis in our family is threatening to tear it apart. James’s decision to disavow the life he has been living until now as a husband, father and normal heterosexual male has driven a wedge between me and our children. Your death brought the three of us closer together than we had ever been but now that strong bond has fractured. I had assumed at first that Catherine would support me in trying to persuade James to halt his manic search for identity, as he calls it. But I was wrong.

After my tension-filled meeting with James in Singapore, I tried to convey to Catherine something

of its nature in the hope she would at least provide me with some comforting words. In an e-mail to her, I said that I had returned to Kuala Lumpur in a tired and daunted state.

“It has taken me nearly eight years to achieve a state of mind where I can manage to hold in check the hope-destroying waves of depression that engulfed me with the death of your mother,” I said. “After my meeting with James, I had to struggle hard not to let the black cloud overwhelm me again.

“Erika had spoken to me of her concern over how James seemed to be at an emotional breaking-point as he tried to provide a rationale for his actions. But to witness personally the outward manifestation of the tumult going on within your brother was devastating.

“It was - and I am trying not to be dramatic or trite - as if the form of the person I knew as James had been taken over by an alien presence. At the very least, he is a stranger to me.

“I no longer think that I alone can stop him from pursuing this path he has chosen. He defends the gay concept with the ardour of the converted. Everything he says is a mockery of the values Siu Mei and I believed we had inculcated in our children. As I told James, homosexual behaviour is abhorrent to me. If he continues on this course he has chosen he will become even more of a stranger, with whom I will have precious little in common.”

While I did not ask Catherine to do anything I hoped she would grasp that I considered it was urgently necessary for something to be done. But there was a polemical air to her response which, in my opinion, showed little regard for my feelings.

I ended my message by saying: “What really startled me was James’s statement that he would change his name to save me embarrassment.”

She replied: “I’m not surprised he told you that, considering the way you’ve reacted.”

She went on to say that my response to James’s “crisis” saddened her.

“This is your son you are presuming to pass judgement on,” she declared. “And you appear to be doing it on less information than you might scramble together for a rushed overnight press story.”

Good God, I thought, my anger rising, what the hell does she know about writing a news article.

Catherine said there were two ways to look at what was happening. One could take the view that James was ill and needed help or assume that he was in full control of his actions and must therefore have good reasons for the decisions he was making.

“Either way, any form of pre-judgement is, as I see it, inappropriate,” Catherine stated. “We need to give James credit for being the intelligent, sensitive and caring person that we know he is. I do not agree that his character has radically changed in some way. We should try to empathise with this personal struggle of James, rather than wallowing in our own reactions and prejudices.”

I was shaken and outraged by this explicit attack on me. How could my own daughter use such harsh language when she could not fail to be aware of the extent to which I had become depressed and dispirited by James's actions?

Catherine conceded that she regarded with some apprehension the idea of homosexual men and women raising children and held the belief that some of the rights being demanded by gays smacked of other forms of politically-correct affirmative action and were therefore wrong.

"But those issues are a long way from what we are dealing with here and are not sticks with which to beat the entire homosexual community," she said. "What does seem clear is that for most members of the gay community, their sexual orientation is NOT a matter of choice, NOT a matter of lifestyle (a word you have used a number of times in relations to James's predicament) and NOT really a matter of communal concern at all."

Each use of the word "not" in capital letters was a slap in my face, which further intensified my ire.

"To lump all gays together as a single societal grouping because of their sexuality seems to me as inappropriate as generalising about members of the same race or religion. It might be relevant for the most general of observations but not when it comes to making a judgement about an individual member of the community.

"Being gay is not a concept. It is a fact. If James is gay then we either deal with it or we do not. But trying to pretend that we can force it back into a box and ignore it is not realistic. What we need to do is help James, Erika and the children through to the best new point of equilibrium possible."

Catherine ended up by saying that she had posted to me the book on families, which had helped her at times when she was facing problems in her life.

Perhaps I should have waited before replying to her, allowing time for my immediate fury to fade but I immediately started hitting the computer keys, giving free rein to my rage and frustration in a short blast of emotive words.

"I do not need your patronising comments and I certainly do not need any books to read," I told her. "To relate my response to my career is a puerile comment not worthy of you."

I went on: "I make my judgements on the basis of many more years of experience than you or James. I suggest we maintain a respect for each other's viewpoint without disparaging remarks, lest it affect our own relationship."

But I knew that my relationship with both my children had already been adversely affected. And I also knew that with every remark I made I was widening the void between us. As a writer, I needed to put down my thoughts and reactions on paper, or key them into a computer. However, this gave a permanency and weight to the words that they would not have had if they were merely blurted out in the course of conversation. But the issue of James's sexuality seemed to have

destroyed my self-control and despite sensing that I was sliding beyond rationality I was unable to exercise the restraint that logic dictated.

The situation deteriorated further as Catherine and I continued to exchange increasingly fraught messages.

Offering apologies if she had offended me, Catherine said that was not her intention. But she then created greater offence. She said he sought merely to defend her brother, whom I seemed “so ready to disown”, adding: “And this is something over which he has much less control than you seem to suppose; and something for which you are partly responsible.”

Declaring that I needed to read some books, including the one she had sent me, she said that in this matter my “years of experience” seemed one-eyed.

“Perhaps this is due to unpleasant experiences,” my daughter remarked. “I do not know what may have occurred but your attitude is intensely homophobic.”

I was incensed by the thrust of her latest message and curtly asked her to explain my partial responsibility for James’s homosexuality. I said I would be “most interested to know the basis upon which you have come to this conclusion”.

“Since I am his father, I am ‘partly’ responsible for the fact that he is here but, presumably, you have more than that in mind,” I said.

Catherine wrote back that she was not implying blame but did not elaborate on her postulation. Instead, she said that it would be wrong for me to assume that she was not also responding with pain and despair to the situation.

“The most important thing for me is family,” she said. “And I have always looked forward to times when my children and James’s could spend time together, even if separated by great distances.”

Then, in remarks that resonated with me, she said that she still carried a sadness that she had “never got to really know” my parents or my sisters and their children and had met no other relatives on either my mother or father’s side.

Catherine went on to say that the current situation threatened her goal to ensure her family did not suffer a similar loss. “That is why I am doing what I can to help everyone through it. But I am now terribly afraid that an unhappy resolution will create painful permanent scars in relationships on all sides.”

My God, Siu Mei, this is something that I do not want. But I fear it is already happening.

All my love,

John



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## Chapter Seventeen

Scott sat in the kitchen of his apartment staring into the cup of tea he had made for himself. His mind kept rerunning Catherine's remarks about never getting to "really know" his Edinburgh-born mother and New Zealand father or his sisters and their children and not meeting at all any other kin from his side of the family. This had reminded him of his unhappiness as a child in not having grandparents, uncles, aunts or cousins to visit. The boys and girls at his schools always seemed to be going off to spend weekends or holidays with relatives. This never happened to him.

Catherine was more fortunate. While the expatriate existence of Scott and his wife meant their son and daughter did not have relatives living nearby, the children had opportunities to spend time with their grandparents in Indonesia on several occasions when they accompanied their mother on trips from Hong Kong to her home country and they twice visited their grandparents in Auckland during family holiday excursions to New Zealand. In the course of their stays in each country they also met some uncles, aunts and cousins. But the Chinese links were more numerous and stronger. There was a large gap in their father's family tree, which he was not able to fill in for them.

The reasons for this were complex. Scott's mother did not return to Scotland after her marriage and did nothing to foster ties between her children and their Scottish relatives. Scott surmised she had cut her links with Scotland because her husband was too poor to give her a trip home and their circumstances during the Great Depression years between the two world wars were so dire that she simply ceased writing letters to Edinburgh rather than have to lie or tell the embarrassing truth about her life in New Zealand. More oddly, she also severed all contacts with her husband's family in New Zealand, although his brother and a sister were only a couple of hours away by train.

This situation grew out of the hostile reaction of Gordon Scott's family to his marriage to the woman he had met in Scotland during the First World War. They apparently had wanted him to marry a local girl and were less than welcoming to his bride, even though she was born in the country from which her father-in-law had emigrated. Their attitude was typical of many people in New Zealand, which had lost 16,000 of its of its finest young men in the disastrous Gallipoli campaign and in the carnage of trench warfare on the Western Front. Another 40,000 had been wounded, many of them returning home with missing limbs or other serious injuries. This had drastically reduced the balance between males and females, resulting in a vast pool of eligible women who would never find a husband. Soldiers who returned home with foreign brides were regarded as men without honour who had treated the nation's womanhood disrespectfully. Faced with the scorn of the Scotts, the young bride from Edinburgh had retaliated by ceasing to recognise their existence, her husband apart. Her children were barred from visiting or even talking about the black-balled grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. The man she had married maintained clandestine communication with his parents until they died but his relations with them were strained until the end and he made no effort to mend his ties with his brother or sister.

John Scott played alone as a child. He had two sisters, one four years older than him and the other his senior by eight years. The family lived on the outskirts of Whangarei, a small town in the north

of New Zealand and while they had little money, the rented property included fruit trees and a vegetable garden. They also kept a few hens and roosters, which were the responsibility of young John, who fed them each day and collected the eggs. Every week or two, his mother would pick out a chook for the cooking pot and he would fetch a small hand axe and chop off its head as he had been taught to do, with a stab of guilt if his victim had been a special favourite when it was a furry yellow chick. Then he would watch while his mother undertook the tedious process of plucking it in hot water and searing the skin.

The only excitement came when a cow or bull broke away from a mob of cattle moving down the road on the way to the town's abattoir and charged through the shrubbery marking the front boundary of Scott's home. From his play place under the house, he would gaze out wide-eyed at the wild commotion of a frightened beast, barking dogs, and a farmer on horseback trampling on his mother's flower beds as she ran among the uninvited guests, screaming and beating at the animals with a broom.

Scott had an imaginary friend, Bill, to whom he chatted on the long walk to primary school on a gravel road, which continually made his bare feet sore with stone bruises. His only real friend before he got to know his fellow pupils was an old German who had arrived in New Zealand before the First World War and owned land separated by a fence from the Scott home. On his property, he grew vegetables for sale to retailers and kept two cows and a bull in an enclosed paddock. He did not like to be bothered by a small boy when he was tending the neat rows of tomatoes, cabbages, lettuce, peas and beans but, at the end of the day, after he had coaxed his cows into the milking shed, he would give a bellow, which was almost a yodel, in his still-thick Bavarian accent, summoning "kleine John" to join him. Scott would take his mug from the kitchen and, keeping a wary eye on the bull, make his way across the paddock to where Herr Schmidt, as he called himself, was milking his cows.

The boy would stand quietly watching Herr Schmidt's fingers working expertly on a cow until he turned a teat in his direction with a nod and a smile. Then the German would squirt a stream of milk into the mug in Scott's outstretched hand until bubbles of foam flowed over the top and onto his fingers. Sitting on a stool he sipped at the warm creamy treat, which was the highlight of his day, and listened to tales about the youthful Schmidt hiking and skiing in Bavaria's mountains.

Herr Schmidt had decided as a young man that he wanted to see the rest of the world and headed for the port of Bremen, where he talked himself into a job as a seaman on a freighter. Two years after he had joined the ship, it docked in Auckland to unload and take on cargo. It was July, 1914.

"I wanted a woman. There are times when a man must have a woman," he told Scott, as if he was talking to an adult rather than a small boy.

"So I went with my friends to this place. I was full of beer and fell asleep with the girl. My friends assumed I had already left and returned to the ship. It sailed early in the morning without me. I wasn't too worried. I thought I would spend a month or two in New Zealand and then find a German ship to take me back home."

Schmidt earned a little money working on the Auckland wharves where he could keep in touch

with shipping movements and, when he was ready, find a German vessel with a crew vacancy. But suddenly, to his surprise, no German ships were steaming into Auckland harbour. The reason became apparent when the First World War erupted. Up to that time, no one had been concerned about the genial young German who openly talked about his misadventure and plans to sign on to another ship in due course. But as soon as Germany became an enemy, someone brought him to the attention of the police, who suspected that he had concocted his tale of being asleep while his ship steamed out of the harbour and was, in fact, a spy. He was arrested and spent the rest of the war in a detention camp. On his release in 1918, a young woman, whom he had met before his arrest and maintained correspondence with him throughout his four years behind barbed wire, was waiting to greet him. They were married and he became a New Zealand citizen.

Schmidt would often talk about his “beautiful lady” as he gazed at a faded and cracked photograph of a young woman with hair down to her shoulders, which was pinned with a tack to one of the wooden walls of the milking shed. Scott did not have to ask to know this was the German’s wife, who had died from tuberculosis ten years earlier.

The happy time he spent with the German and his cows was in marked contrast with the ordeal he regularly faced on the other side of the paddock. In the evening, when his father came home he was seldom in a good mood. Often, after a few words with his wife, he would summon his son, tell him he had been naughty and send him off to the bathroom. There, hanging from a hook on the wall was the feared razor strop. Scott would stare at it with tears already welling in his eyes until his father walked in, took it down and told him to hold out his hands. Sometimes the length of leather, which his father used to sharpen the long blade of his “cut-throat” razor, would come down with stinging impact on his hands; on other occasions it would slap hard and painfully against his bare legs.

Looking back, he could not remember doing anything seriously mischievous or disobedient that might warrant corporal punishment, apart from the time he climbed up on the roof of the back porch and jumped off, using an open umbrella as an ineffectual parachute. That brought him several lashes on his legs and backside. It may have been a dumb thing to do but, on reflection, it seemed to him his parents should have been grateful he was not injured, apart from scratches and a strained calf muscle, and disciplined their shaken son with a scolding rather than a beating.

After his punishment he would be told to stop crying and go to the dinner table, where his sisters gave him sympathetic looks but said nothing for fear of attracting their father’s ire. On nights when he had an appointment in the bathroom with the razor strop, he had little appetite for food. One dish he could not stomach - literally - even when he was hungry. Unfortunately, his mother’s rice pudding was a favourite of his father, who was unable to fathom how anyone could not enjoy it. Besides, due to the family’s impecunious state most of the time, no food could be wasted. So John had to eat his rice pudding, despite the fact that he frequently had to rush from the table into the backyard as his stomach rejected the thick, glutinous lumps he had reluctantly spooned into his mouth.

After helping to wash the dishes, he was permitted to read one of his books, which from a young age were his escape from loneliness and the harsh real world, before he was sent to bed. In the room he shared with his younger sister he would lie awake for a long time listening to his mother

and father shouting at each other with angry voices.

As he grew older and read about the war Scott came to an understanding of what his father had been through and his resentment turned to sympathy. He learned from his sisters that their soldier dad had been wounded both at Gallipoli and in France but considered himself lucky that he had survived and his wounds had healed without causing him lasting physical disability. However, the slaughter he witnessed on the battlefield, including the deaths in front of his eyes of many comrades who had become close friends, had left emotional scars that never healed. As well, the war had a severely damaging impact on the promising prospects of the young man who joined up to help save the British Empire. He had been a star rugby player in 1914. More than four years later, it was too late to revive his sporting career. The bank where he had worked in Napier offered him his job back but after a few weeks confined to a desk supervising tellers he quit and headed north with his bride and baby girl to Whangarei, where he set up a property business with a friend. Sadly, the Great Depression sweeping across the world shattered his hope of creating a small enterprise that could give him financial security and a sense of personal achievement.

Like thousands of other returned soldiers, Gordon Scott had believed that after enduring the trauma of living in constant peril amid appalling conditions, he could look forward to a peacetime free from stress and anxiety in which his life would be untroubled and fulfilling. It turned out to be a false vision. Instead, he found himself struggling unsuccessfully, with increasing loss of self-esteem, to establish himself in a job that would provide the minimum income necessary to feed and clothe his family. As a consequence he fell heavily into debt. Gordon Scott and his Scottish wife considered themselves middle-class stock and, despite their increasing indigence, refused to accept that they had fallen into a lower category. As a result, they frowned on their son's close friendship with a classmate, who lived with two brothers and his parents in a shack beside a railway crossing, where the father was the gate-keeper.

During Scott's childhood in Whangarei, his father never talked about the war. But each year on Anzac Day, the anniversary of the allied landing at Gallipoli, he dressed in his one good suit, pinned on the medals he had won in battle and marched with other ex-soldiers to the cenotaph for the annual commemoration ceremony. Sometimes, Scott's mother took him to see the parade and listen to the speeches and hymn singing. It was apparent that his father was held in high esteem by the other men, many of whom greeted him warmly and shook his hand. His elder sister had told him that their father had worked his way up through the ranks to win a field commission and ended the war as captain. He had won the Military Cross, a medal awarded for conspicuous bravery in combat conditions.

The first time his father revealed his feelings about his war experiences was when, on a visit home from Asia, Scott joined his parents in watching a BBC television programme with old film of allied soldiers climbing out of Western Front trenches to advance on enemy lines. "God, the smells," the old man muttered, speaking partly to himself and partly to his son. "They never leave your nostrils. The sickening smell of the mud, the fearful smell of mustard gas and, worst of all, the horrible smell of death."

The war had been a terrible experience, causing Gordon Scott severe physical and mental pain, but it had given him rank and authority which he lost when he returned to civilian life. Accordingly,

when, in September, 1939, a new conflict erupted in Europe with the same principal combatants, he immediately offered to serve as a soldier again. With Gordon Scott's induction into the army, his wife was left to face the problem of aggressive debt collectors, the prospect of being evicted because of unpaid rent and the uncertainty of whether her husband would return. She disposed of the financial difficulties by decamping for Auckland to start a new life in a new city. Since the salary of a soldier, even an officer, was not large, she found a job working in the kitchen of a cake shop and rented a house nearby.

Her husband, meanwhile, was given the rank of major and sent with a unit to Fiji, a New Zealand protectorate, amid fears it would be targeted, along with other South Pacific islands, by German raiders. Although Japan's entry on the side of the Axis brought the war all the way to the northern border of Australia, Fiji did not come under attack and Scott's father was spared the horrors experienced by Australian and New Zealand soldiers fighting the Japanese elsewhere in the Pacific or as prisoners of war. However, since he was either serving in Fiji or training recruits in army camps in New Zealand for the duration of the war, his son's adolescent years were spent without the presence of a male parent. But the absence of his father did not cause Scott as much anguish as the move from Whangarei to Auckland. He was half-way through his first term as a Form 1 pupil at Whangarei High School, cementing friendships with some of the boys who had been at his primary school, when he was abruptly transferred to a new city. The education system was different in Auckland and he spent two difficult years at a primary school - where he was a regular target of the resident bully - before enrolling at Auckland Grammar as a Form 3 student. Having been told by his mother since he was a child that "boys don't cry", he taught himself to conceal his emotions and succeeded so well that they remained under tight control until the death of his wife.

By the time his father returned home he had spent four years grappling on his own with the problems of growing up and was a self-sufficient teenager about to start university. Studying during the day and working at the New Zealand Herald newspaper at night, he saw little of his parents. So when, having decided to try his luck in Australia, he boarded a Sydney-bound, Tasman Empire Airways Limited flying boat, there was little emotion at leaving home. Scott returned to New Zealand only for short, infrequent visits and while, out of a sense of duty, he kept his mother and father informed about his movements and activities in long letters, to which one or other of them would reply, their exchanges were generally free of sentiment.

As a foreign correspondent, he found a satisfying camaraderie among his colleagues. But it was the nature of their business that friendships were regularly cut short when people were reassigned to new countries. It was not until he married the young Chinese woman whom he had met in Indonesia that he discovered how stronger bonds could exist within a family. His wife had resented her father's attempt to dictate the way she should live and had broken free to make a life of her own choosing. But neither she nor her father, whom she had angered by her actions, let this destroy their relationship as parent and daughter and closely-linked members of an extended family.

When Scott visited the home of his wife's parents in Surabaya, during a working visit to Indonesia after their marriage in Hong Kong, he was warmly welcomed and accorded guest-of-hour treatment at a dinner party attended by more than 30 family members, some of whom had come to the city for the occasion from remote parts of East Java. It gave him a sense of family he never had

and the desire to imbue his own small unit with the same underpinning of close and enduring kinship.

But now the tensions between him and his children were causing the kind of alienation that had split the earlier generation of Scotts. It seemed he was doomed to make the same mistakes as his forebears.

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## Chapter Eighteen

September 28

My Dearest Siu Mei,

Having perceived that my exchanges with Catherine were only making matters worse, I should have brought an end to them. But I kept telling myself that it was James who had caused the rift, not me. At the same time, I was still smarting from Catherine's earlier message, which, despite the disclaimer, seemed to be apportioning some blame to me for James's actions. So when I had finished writing a report on political developments for my newspaper I resumed my correspondence with our daughter.

"You haven't answered my question," I told her testily. "You made a provocative assertion and I am simply asking you to state your basis for it so I can give it due consideration. Why am I partly responsible for James's 'current predicament'?"

My brief e-mail provoked an angry blast from Catherine that reinforced my belief that we were engaged in an altercation that could only drive us further and further apart.

"What makes you so defensive and aggressive about this matter?" she asked. "Why are you attacking me when I sought to defend my brother against your unwarranted language? How can you attempt to take the high ground when you use words like abhorrent and aberrant in relation to your own son? I am baffled by how you can take such an attitude towards James."

How could I explain my emptiness and hopelessness, derived from the sense that I no longer seemed to be in charge of my life, which had once seemed blessed by good fortune, a loving wife and two children with whom I could find no serious fault. Now I faced a harsh scolding from our first-born, whose smile and happy disposition as a two-year-old had always filled me with joy.

Turning to my "responsibility," she urged me to "read the literature", including the book she had sent me, because I probably would not accept her explanation. "There is a consensus amongst a majority of behavioural and clinical psychologists that the sexual orientation of a child is set within the first three years of his or her life. More particularly, that the sexuality of a boy is set between the ages of one to two years when he works out that he is more like Dad than Mum.

“But this only takes place - this move from being his mother’s child to being Daddy’s boy - if the father is available and willing to provide close, supportive, regular and loving contact with the child during that period. I remember you as always being a distant father.

“My question to you is: do you remember the period between James’s second and third birthdays? Were you away a lot? Were you particularly busy during that period? If so, that, according to the psychologists, would be enough to create a gap in James’s upbringing at a crucial time, which would have left him identifying more with his mother than his father. These psychologists contend that the homosexual son is therefore still searching for the father love that he missed during this period.”

Our increasingly angry exchanges had taken an unreal turn. I had read enough about the conflicting theories on how much nature or nurture affected human behaviour to know that there was a wide range of views, including the belief in a homosexual gene, on what led to sexual inclination. And Catherine’s conjecture was destroyed by the reality.

“The fact of the matter is that I did no work-related travelling during the first three years of James’s life, which coincided with my first three years with The Washington Post,” I told her. “My job was to write about China - as a China watcher unable to enter the country - and Hong Kong.”

“It was only later that I began to travel throughout the rest of Asia for the Post and then it was only for relatively short trips. Compared with most of my Hongkong-based colleagues, I was away from the colony for relatively brief periods.

“I was at home at least part of the day for virtually every day of young James’s life. I played with him and talked with him (even when he couldn’t talk) just as I did with you. I was very, very proud to have two such fine children. The first three years of James’s life was the best time of all our lives. Your mother and I were happy with each other and with our family. It was a warm, loving relationship among us all. Just look at the photographs from that time. We believed we were a special family. Siu Mei and I looked at the people around us and marvelled at how lucky we were.”

While I was dismissive of Catherine’s theorising about James’s homosexuality, I was upset by her description of me as a distant father. Was this because I was stern when the children were naughty and demanding on the question of values and academic goals? My God, was I no better than my own father in the way I treated my children? Whatever the case, Catherine’s perception of me as a dad was no doubt affecting her judgement of me in the context of the current family crisis.

I tried to reach out to her, telling her I was not angry but merely “frustrated at seeing all that was so golden about James’s life turning to dust.”

“Nor was I attacking you. I rebuked you because you responded with seeming insensitivity to my expression of despair, which has since been replaced by resignation. I have no one else in this world to whom I can openly express my feelings in this matter, Catherine. It is just a little bit lonely out here.”

I said I did not believe my language was unwarranted. “I choose my words with considerable care, as you should know. Words are my life’s work. I did not use the words abhorrent and aberrant in relation to James but to homosexuality. I make no apology for finding it abhorrent.” I reminded Catherine that when we talked on the telephone she conceded to me that she “felt repulsion” towards the homosexual act.

“My reaction should have come as no surprise to James. He would surely have been surprised if I had said anything approving. I chose the word abhorrent carefully because I wanted to disabuse him of any notion that he could become ‘another’ James without enormous damage to the family. My hope, now fading, was that he would stick with his wife and children, even if it was necessary for him to become sexually abstinent.

“You both seem infuriated by my use of the word aberrant. It simply means -see the Pocket Oxford Dictionary - ‘departing from normal type or accepted standard’. As I pointed out to James, the predominant or ‘normal’ segment of society is heterosexual. Societies that do not proscribe homosexuality but permit it between consenting adults do so because of their strong belief in individual liberty and not to give it their endorsement. Homosexuals must live with that and all it implies.

“You said I seemed so ready to disown James. However, when James asked about our future relationship I told him: ‘You are my son and my door will be open to you at any time.’

“I commend you for your support of your brother . You bear a heavy burden of responsibility since he indicated he considered you to be the only person in the family giving him a sympathetic hearing.

“Since you have gone to the trouble of sending that book to me, I suppose I will have to read it. Meanwhile, I am due for new pictures of my grand-daughters.”

I hoped my final remarks would relieve some of the tension that had built up between us but our fiercely contentious exchanges had left me emotionally exhausted. I wanted to drive to Bangsar and drink more than my usual two beers but remembered that alcohol had not helped in the wake of your death.

I will find it hard to sleep tonight.

All my love,

John

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Chapter Nineteen

As Scott routinely switched on the television to catch the evening news bulletin, his mind was not



on Malaysian developments but the remarks made by his daughter in her latest email. He had always firmly believed, as he had told her, that the time when the children were growing up in Hong Kong was the best years of their lives but it was unsettling that Catherine now described him as a distant father and implied he hadn't given her brother the loving contact that would have assured he grew into a heterosexual male. While he was not impressed by her pop psychology, he was nevertheless concerned that she should look back at her early years with such a jaundiced view.

Images of the Prime Minister flashed across the television screen interspersed with inspiring snatches of Malaysian achievement - including sporting victories, a parachute drop by a group of adventurers at the North Pole, the Malaysian Grand Prix and the capital's tall buildings - in the nightly exaltation of his leadership ahead of the news. When the face of the presenter appeared, Scott turned up the sound. But after the impassive Malay male had provided a brief foretaste of the main stories, each of which had the boring imprint of an item issued by the Department of Information, he muted it again. Staring at the screen inattentively, he was beset with a growing discomfort. How could Catherine have come to this way of thinking. Until now she had always spoken warmly of her youth in Hong Kong. It was not an ideal place to raise children but he and his wife had actively striven to ensure Catherine and James had a standard upbringing despite the exotic nature of the place in which they came into the world.

Would anything have been different, if the children had not been born in Hong Kong and not spent their formative years there? He did not think so. If he believed this he would have to accept some responsibility for the way things had turned out. It was his choice to make Hong Kong the first home of his family. He had always wanted to go back after his initial brief experience of living in the British Crown Colony in 1954.

Then, it still had the look of an early twentieth century outpost on the China coast, reminiscent of the days when pirates were raiding nearby villages and even some of the colony's outlying islands. Pirate attacks were less common in the 1950s but Hong Kong had yet to make the economic leap that would transform it from an entrepot port into a thriving manufacturing centre, with concrete towers of flats and offices squeezed together from the Chinese border to the highest point of Victoria Peak like pins clustered in a seamstress's cushion. As he crossed the harbour on a ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong on the day of his arrival in the colony, Scott had taken a photograph with the new Canon camera he had bought in Japan. In the panoramic print which he had kept, most of the buildings on the waterfront were the same colonnaded Victorian or Edwardian-style structures - of three or four-storeys - that had been there 50 years earlier. The one recent addition was a new ten-storey office block, which stood out because of its height. The most visible features of the upper face of Victoria Peak, rising behind the central business district, were rock outcrops and vegetation, with a scattering of houses and the Matilda Hospital providing the only hint of the massive development to come.

He was fascinated by Hong Kong - its rich history as a product of the Opium Wars, its contrasting communities of occidentals and Chinese living practically separate lives, and its unlikely existence, by virtue of nineteenth century treaties, as a tiny neighbour of an unpredictable giant. The Japanese had seized Hong Kong as part of their Pacific war plan but when the Communists came to power in Peking in 1949, the new Chinese government held back from making any overt move

against the colony, although its agents infiltrated the government and police. However, Communist leaders foreshadowed a future reckoning by railing frequently against the “unequal treaties”, which had deeded Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories to the British. China’s menacing presence was part of the excitement of Hong Kong for Scott, who conceived of it as a vast predator waiting to pounce on its prey. But the Foreign Office and its local representatives continued to act with the colonial conceit that the Chinese would never dare to challenge British rule, as if nothing had changed in the more than 100 years since Britain seized Hong Kong.

If the past and the potential for great news stories in the future was not enough to attract Scott to Hong Kong, the picturesqueness of the place and the expatriate lifestyle sealed his desire to return one day. He loved the cosmopolitan character of the crowded streets and the spectacle of junks, ferries, freighters and ocean liners miraculously dodging one another in the choppy waters of the busy harbour that lay between the flat mainland and the island with its head in the clouds.

After his flight landed at Kai Tak on that introductory visit, a bus took Scott and other passengers to the rear entrance of the Peninsula Hotel, then the leading hotel, which had been opened in 1928 and served as the city terminal for the airlines. He had been sent to Hong Kong from Japan, which had been his first posting as a correspondent for the Reuter news agency, to stand in for the bureau chief for two months, while he combined a vacation with sick leave to recover from a bout of hepatitis. The man he was temporarily replacing, a laconic Canadian, Harry Larkin, stepped forward to greet him as he stepped down from the bus and after introducing him to his Chinese secretary, who instructed two coolies to take charge of Scott’s bags, led him to a ricksha. While the coolies trotted off carrying Scott’s bags on bamboo poles, he and Larkin were conveyed a few hundred yards to a wharf, where they boarded a cross-harbour ferry. On the island, they were met by Larkin’s driver who ushered them into the office car.

Scott looked around for his bags.

“I hope they haven’t run off with my luggage,” he said.

Larkin laughed. “Don’t worry. Leung will have them taken to your hotel room. Let’s have lunch first.” As they got into the car, he said to the driver. “F.C.C.”

The F.C.C. turned out to be the Foreign Correspondents’ Club, which had leased a grand mansion from a Hong Kong tycoon on a lower slope of The Peak. Alighting from their car at the rear of the building, they walked through a lobby to a balcony overlooking Hong Kong harbour. With no high-rise buildings then constructed on the island, Scott had an unobstructed view across the water and beyond the buildings on the mainland strip of the colony to distant hills along the border. On the near side of the harbour, sampans selling souvenirs and other wares danced around a large American aircraft carrier parked adjacent to the British naval dockyard and an area, which he later discovered was called Wanchai, where bar girls waited to greet the sailors.

As they seated themselves at a table on the balcony, Larkin said: “I’ll arrange your membership before I leave.”

With the harbour as a backdrop, they drank beers and ate an excellent lunch of onion soup and

crumbed veal served by friendly Chinese waiters, many of whom had worked in the correspondents' club in Shanghai before fleeing to Hong Kong when Mao Tse-tung and his communist comrades seized power. It was an enjoyable start to a pleasant two-month assignment, which was over too soon for Scott.

So when he decided to take a break from working for Reuters to write a book on Indonesia, he selected Hong Kong as the place to do it, with the intention in the back of his mind of trying to find a job there when the project was completed. Soon after he moved to the colony from Jakarta he found he was missing the young Chinese woman he had met in Indonesia so much that he called her on the telephone and asked her to marry him. She immediately agreed and joined him in Hong Kong, which enchanted her as much as it had Scott. They were of one accord that it should be their home for the foreseeable future.

He had only good memories of the 15 years they spent there. He was sure his wife would be of the same mind if she was still alive.

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## Chapter Twenty

September 29

My Dearest Siu Mei,

It is one o'clock in the morning. I could not sleep. I have been thinking back to our early days in Hong Kong in the wake of Catherine's remarks, which suggested that James's homosexual inclination began there. I think it's an absurd proposition and I'm sure you would agree with me. Compared with the many dysfunctional expatriate families in the colony, we were amazingly normal. We were happy during our early years in Hong Kong when we had little money as well as later when I was earning a reasonable salary. Even when you were pregnant with Catherine and my savings were draining away, we would wander barefooted along the beach at Repulse Bay and affirm to each other we would rather be living in Hong Kong than anywhere else. If the joy and contentment of a husband and wife resounds in the womb, then both Catherine and James had every reason to feel loved and wanted. You and I were even more enthralled with our China Coast environment when, after I joined The Washington Post, we moved to the busy side of the island, leasing a mid-levels apartment, where James was conceived, and later finding a larger, fancier unit on Borrett Road with a spectacular panorama of the harbour. When I looked out at the vista of rapidly spreading high-rise office buildings and apartments on the island and Kowloon, I was always reminded of the vastly different sight that met my eyes from the old Foreign Correspondents' Club on my first visit to Hong Kong. But change, I soon discovered, was to become endemic to Hong Kong.

In the years following our marriage, Hong Kong became increasingly crowded with refugees from China and underwent a transformation from a quaint colonial outpost - a pimple on the belly of the Chinese giant, in the words of an English politician - to a major manufacturing centre, as Chinese

entrepreneurs used the growing supply of labour and ingenuity to develop export industries. In the process, the pace of life grew faster and the territory lost much of the charm that had captivated the both of us. During my first stay in Hong Kong, the most distinctive sound was the shuffle and slap of mahjong tiles coming from open apartment windows. By the 1960s, the stuttering clamour of jackhammers drowned out virtually every other noise. As the population increased dramatically, severe water restrictions were introduced, violent crime increased and diseases such as cholera crossed into the colony from China. Heroin was cheap and easily available.

But the changes meant that Hong Kong became a more important story in its own right as well as being a window on Mao's China, where events were moving to the chaotic upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, with its battling Red Guards and horrific reports of death and destruction. When that cataclysmic political movement spilled over into Hong Kong, leading to riots and bombs planted in city streets, the colony no longer looked as eternal as it once seemed. British rule continued as Mao's last revolution petered out but it was not long before plans were being made for Hong Kong's return to China.

Despite all this, you agreed with me that we should stay on until the children were in their teens and it was time to find them better high schools than the colony offered. Although Hong Kong had become less secure and more frenetic, I was satisfied that the prudent precautions I had taken would ensure the safety of our family. The tenants of each of the spacious apartments in which we stayed were either wealthy Chinese or expatriates. When the children were little they were always in the care of one of their parents or an amah. When they were old enough to go to school, they were taken there and brought home by car, either by me or the office driver.

At weekends, we went to the exclusive Hong Kong Country Club, where the children swam under supervision and you and I played tennis. Often we were invited by junk-owning friends to sail out to Lantau or one of the colony's other islands, where we lunched, swam or water-skied behind a hired motor-boat.

We sought always, when Catherine and James were not with us, to place them in an environment where they were under supervision. On Saturday mornings, they joined other children for organised games at the Hong Kong Cricket Club under the eye of a former British army regimental sergeant-major. I was confident that with all their scheduled activities, our daughter and son were protected from the hazards of the drug and crime-ridden city Hong Kong had become. As the children grew older there was a growing number of school excursions and invitations to stay with friends. But when we agreed to an outing we made sure they were always in the company of adults we knew and trusted.

Many of the classmates of our daughter and son lived near our apartment in Borrett Road and they repeatedly asked us if they could visit them on their bicycles. However, we ruled that they could ride their bicycles only in the grounds of the apartment complex, which was closed to non-residents, with the exception of invited guests, or at the Hong Kong Country Club, where they could not get into any serious trouble. It was only after we moved to Australia, when Catherine was 15 and James 13, that we allowed them to go out alone.

I fretted about the ease with which anyone could buy drugs. An American television journalist's

son, who was the same age as Catherine, became a heroin user when he could not purchase marijuana, which he had smoked in the United States. His father sent him to a clinic for drug addicts in the Philippines but he walked out and was caught by police buying heroin on a Manila street. We talked to the children and made them aware of the dangers and regarded them as smart enough not to blindly follow friends who might be experimenting with drugs.

When I recall our days in Hong Kong, I am sure that we did everything we could to give the children a good life. James was a normal and happy boy and it is ridiculous for Catherine to link his current avowal of homosexuality to our time in the colony. Neither I nor Hong Kong were to blame. Our son came to his turning point at this time in his life by his own decision and the past had nothing to do with it. Catherine is making assumptions with faulty hindsight, finding reasons to explain an event which could not be easily explained. On the basis of my analysis, I have decided I can reject her criticism of me. But it does not alter the fact that she is no longer the unfailingly loving daughter I had presumed her to be. And this development has left me decidedly out of sorts.

I am sure that if you were here you would give me the assurance I need that there was nothing I could have done to prevent the situation that has arisen. God, if only you were here to give me that comfort.

All my love,

John

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## Chapter Twenty-One

A comely young Chinese woman representing The Star newspaper gave Scott a welcoming smile and an Indian reporter from Reuters hit him with a friendly slap on the shoulder as he joined the queue of journalists lining up outside the court complex on Jalan Raja, across the road from the Royal Selangor Club. The club had been the centre of social life for expatriates in the heyday of British colonial rule and the High Court building, outside which he and other members of the media were standing, dated from the same era. An inscription on the sandstone face beside him declared that the colonnaded structure was opened on October 6, 1894, by Sultan Abdul Samad in the presence of Sir Charles Mitchell, Governor of the Straits Settlements and W.H. Treacher, British Resident. As he glanced around at the Malaysian news men and women lining up to enter the court, he felt almost as old as the building. Most of them were in their twenties and he realised that he must look like an elderly foreign tourist who had joined the wrong queue. It was occasions like this that made him wonder why on earth he was still working for a daily newspaper. But he was so addicted to the life of a foreign correspondent that he wanted to cover the Anwar story at first hand. Accordingly, when Yusof had woken him to pass on the information that the former deputy prime minister had been spirited into the court complex early that morning and would be appearing before a judge at 9 a.m., he had quickly showered and dressed and driven to a car park on Jalan Raja.

As the line of journalists moved slowly forward to a security check point where they were required to show identification, present any bags for examination and surrender mobile phones and tape recorders, Scott saw a portly white man burst from a taxi and scamper towards the entrance to the court complex. It was Farmer, who waved to Scott as he took his place at the end of the queue.

“How did you hear about this?” Scott called back to his colleague.

Farmer, whose face was glistening with sweat, grinned. “I flew in from Singapore on the first flight this morning and got chatting with the taxi driver who brought me in from the airport. He said the police and riot squad were out in force around the High Court area so I told him to bring me here and drop my bags at my hotel.”

Inside the small chamber that was Sessions Court Four the public gallery had been divided into sections for the media, Anwar’s family and associates and a few people randomly chosen by police from a large crowd waiting in the street for a chance to see the proceedings. Under the direction of a police officer, Scott ended up wedged between two local journalists with barely enough room to move his arms so he could write in his notebook. After half-an-hour, Anwar’s wife entered through a back door with her two teenage daughters and were ushered to the seats set aside for them. Azizah was wearing the Muslim tudung, a face-encircling head covering, as she always did, and a neck to ankle baju. But her modest clothing was made from an expensive fabric printed with yellow flowers, marking her as a member of Malaysia’s wealthier class of citizens. The family had prospered from the special privileges accorded Malays and the influential position of Anwar. Also in Azizah’s party were the former deputy prime minister’s mother, father and sister, whom Scott recognised from newspaper photographs.

The father, the papers had said, was in his seventies and Scott studied him with interest, thinking what a shock it must have been for the family to have fallen unexpectedly from a position of power and prestige within the community and now be facing the ignominy of having the brilliantly successful eldest son not only dismissed from government and expelled from his party but brought to court as a common prisoner.

After another few minutes nine lawyers representing Anwar, including the country’s five most celebrated barristers, took their places before the bench, where the prosecution team, headed by the Attorney General, were already seated. More than four decades after Britain extended self-government to its former colony, Malaya, the court procedures of the Federation of Malaysia were still very British in nature. Judges and lawyers wore black robes and used the legal language and procedures of British courts. On a barked order from a court orderly, everyone stood up as the judge, also dressed traditionally, entered. He nodded to the orderly, who signalled waiting police to bring the defendant to the dock from a holding cell below the courtroom. As Anwar appeared at the stop of the stairs, flanked by Special Branch officers, several people in the public gallery gasped and a woman journalist near Scott exclaimed: “What have they done to him?”

Anwar’s left eye was swollen and bruised as if he had walked into a door or someone had struck him. He looked pale and unwell but smiled as he grasped his wife’s outstretched hand for a moment and waved to the media on his way to the dock.

“They beat me,” he said to his wife and the journalists.

The judge asked how he had received his black eye and Anwar said he was punched “very hard” on the head, forehead and neck in the lock-up at police headquarters at Bukit Aman - Malay for Hill of Peace - which had been the central base for law enforcement forces since British colonial days. He said the blows were so strong that his eyes and lips bled and he lost consciousness until the following morning when a police officer helped him and wiped away the blood. He was not allowed to see a doctor until five days after the assault.

At the judge’s instigation, the Attorney General said he would have Anwar’s accusation investigated, drawing a sceptical, “Huh” from the woman journalist. Then, the clerk of the court read out nine charges against the defendant, furnishing for the first time the basis on which the former deputy prime minister was being prosecuted. The first five counts, dealing with alleged corrupt practices by Anwar sparked only a mild interest in Scott. But he sat up as the clerk spelled out the next five charges. In each, Anwar was accused of sodomy. He was alleged to have “committed carnal intercourse against the order of nature” against his family’s former driver Azizan Abu Bakar, his adopted brother Sukma, his friend Munawar and a fourth person. Anwar pleaded not guilty and claimed trial to each of the nine charges. On the application of the prosecution, the judge transferred Anwar’s case to the High Court, setting October 5 as the date for the start of his trial. Bail was refused. Now it was official, Scott thought. First, there were unsupported allegations; then they were given the Prime Minister’s backing; and finally, they had become the subject of charges preferred against Anwar in a court of law.

As the judge retired and members of Anwar’s family and the media pressed forward to try to talk to the prisoner before he was removed from the courtroom, Scott’s attention was focused on the former deputy prime minister’s father. He was standing stiffly behind his wife and Azizah as they stretched out their hands to Anwar, his eyes on his son and his face showing no emotion. What was he thinking, Scott wondered. He edged forward.

“Excuse me,” he said.

The older man turned his head and gave Scott a half smile. “You are from the foreign press?” he asked in English.

“Yes. What is your reaction to the charges against your son?”

“They are fabrications.”

“One of the men he is alleged to have sodomised is your adopted son, Sukma. What do you say to that accusation?”

“It is false, like all the charges. To suggest they would engage in such a sinful practice is ridiculous.”

“How can you be certain your son has never had a homosexual relationship?” Scott asked. He knew immediately it was not the kind of question he would normally pose in his role as a

journalist. It was the question of a father seeking answers that would help him deal with the issue of his own son's sexuality.

Anwar's father spoke vehemently: "I know my son," he said. "He is a pious man. Besides, he is married to a good woman who has given him six children. No one could believe the monstrous accusations made against him. This is the work of his enemies. Tell your readers this."

As he turned around and joined his wife and Azizah to have a final word with Anwar before he was taken away, a young man who had been standing nearby approached Scott. He had been a member of Anwar's staff when he was deputy prime minister.

"Our biggest fear is that they will inject him with the virus that causes AIDS and claim that the fact he is HIV positive proves he was engaged in homosexual activities," the man said.

"I find it hard to believe anything like that could happen," Scott said.

"Anwar's enemies are capable of anything. You will see."

The man rejoined the group of Anwar associates with whom he had been sitting and Scott started moving towards the courtroom door. A hand fell on his shoulder and he glanced back. It was Farmer.

"Good story, eh? Should get a good run. The black eye and all," his colleague said. "Do you reckon they have something on Anwar? I mean, is the government case all bullshit or does the man have multifarious sexual tastes?"

"I don't know. How do you tell if someone is heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, if they don't want you to know?"

"Yeah. Well, either way - whether he's the victim of a conspiracy or he's a trick cyclist - I'd better get off to my hotel and start writing. See you later for a beer?"

"Sure. Give me a call."

As he walked to the car park, Scott wondered if there were any doubts in the mind of Anwar's father about his son's sexuality. Probably not. He did not have to face the fact that his male offspring had declared that he was gay and so it was logical for him to believe that the sodomy charges against Anwar were fabricated. His son had not left his wife or presented his children with a broken home. As Scott's thoughts focused on James, anger grew in him again. He tried to stop thinking about his son. Like Farmer, he had a report to write. Then he remembered the expression of concern by the former Anwar staff member that the former deputy prime minister might be injected with the AIDS virus and shuddered involuntarily. The deadly virus was spreading rapidly throughout South-East Asia, where conservative cultural and religious attitudes were barriers to efforts by health officials to make people aware of the need for safe sex practices. Even where public awareness of AIDS was significantly greater, as in Australia, it had exacted a significant toll in lives. He was seized with fear as it struck him that James had exposed himself to the danger of



being infected by the virus by joining the gay community.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

September 30, 1998

My Dearest Siu Mei,

Catherine did not respond to my overture. I don't think there is anything more I can say to her. She decries every opinion I put forward and shows total insensitivity towards my feelings. I hoped that I could reach James through her but I was obviously mistaken. Meanwhile, the gap between me and our son is now so wide that I don't know if it can ever be closed.

But still I worry about him. The threat of AIDS is on my mind again and earlier my thoughts slipped back to an incident in the period after your death when I spent several hours a day in your shop in Woollahra for about three months, selling stock at discounted prices, before closing it down. My time there brought me solace at the same time as it made me sad. The antique pieces on your desk - snuff bottles, tiny porcelain cups, small jade figures and miniature bronze sculptures, which you used as paper-weights - gave the impression that you had just stepped out for a few minutes and would soon be back. But then I would snap back to the reality that you had died and would never again be sitting in the chair behind your desk. And I would never again enter the shop to take you home or out for dinner and see the welcome and loving smile on your face. I was always so proud of the way you had set up your own business, after years of collecting Chinese antiques, and undertaken intensive study and research that brought you renown as an authority on early porcelain. I was unhappy at having to close the shop but I did not have the knowledge to train someone as a manager or to validate the expertise of anyone offering to run it for me. Having spent time "minding the store", on Saturday afternoons when you wanted to attend an auction or visit a private collector with an item to sell, I had some experience as a sales person. You had supplied me with a notebook containing information about most of the antiques on sale and their prices, with numbers matching the stickers on the stock, which you updated from time to time. In my role as liquidator, I supplemented this material - and kept myself busy - by going through all your papers, identifying other pieces on sale and fixing a price based on the purchase fee plus your usual mark-up. I then added a sticker indicating a 25 per cent reduction for most items.

One day two men in their late thirties came into the store. I remembered them as regular customers whom I had seen on two or three occasions while I was in the shop with you. I had concluded they were gay lovers by the way they exchanged intimate jokes and tenderly touched hands. This time, they were subdued, telling me how deeply sorry they were to hear of your death and how greatly they would miss you. They introduced themselves as Joel and Lionel - assuming, correctly, that I had probably forgotten their names - and said they had come to make the final payment on two early Ming vases which they had purchased. I found the record of the purchase in your cash book and completed the transaction. As I was handing the vases and a receipt to Joel, Lionel, who did not look well and had lost weight since I last saw him, went over to a pair of Sung bowls and said:

“This is what I would really like to have. How much are they now at your sale price?”

I looked at the price listed in my notebook. “They were \$2,000 each or \$4,000 for the pair. Less 25 per cent they are still pretty expensive. \$3,000.”

“Well, I’ll have to admire them from a distance for a little while longer. How long are you keeping the shop open?”

“Perhaps another two months.”

“Okay. We’ll come by again.”

About a month later, on a Saturday, I was in the shop alone when Joel came in. He had previously struck me as a someone who paid attention to his appearance, carefully combing his neatly-cut brown hair back from his forehead and dressing smartly in suits or a jacket and slacks. But on this occasion, his face was drawn and his hair had not been touched by a barber or a comb in some time. He was dressed in jeans and a torn T-shirt.

“Hello,” he said. “I’d like to buy the Sung bowls as a present for Lionel. I can’t pay you the full \$3,000 immediately. Would it be all right if I give you \$2,000 today and the rest later? But I’d like to take the bowls now. Is that possible?”

“I guess so,” I said hesitantly. “It’s a little unusual. What’s the occasion? His birthday? Is that why you want to take them now?”

“No,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “It’s because he’s dying. From AIDS.”

I could not speak for a moment. Then I said: “I’ll wrap them for you. The price is \$2,000. I’m reducing everything to clear.”

“Thank you,” he said.

I next saw Joel when I was supervising the packing of unsold items at the end of the last trading day, which I had announced in a notice in the shop window.

He shook hands with me and said: “I wanted to thank you again for letting me have the Sung bowls at a very low price. You should have seen Lionel’s face when I gave them to him. He looked like a kid with a Christmas present he’d wished for but never expected to get.”

Joel still looked wan but was dressed less untidily than the last time I saw him. I remained silent, sensing there was something more he wanted to say.

“We bade farewell to Lionel last week,” he said. “After the cremation, some friends came to our unit. I burned some joss sticks in front of the Sung bowls. Lionel loved everything Chinese - the art and the culture. We were planning to travel to China but . . .” He shook my hand again and moved quickly to the door as tears came to his eyes. I stood staring after him as he walked down

Queen Street with his shoulders shaking.

Now, I am haunted by the AIDS-ridden ghost of Lionel as I contemplate the future of my gay son. God, how can I live with this terrible prospect. I must try and wipe it from my mind.

All my love,

John

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### Chapter Twenty-Three

Scott did not much like the Cantina, the place on Jalan Telawi in Bangsar where Yusuf habitually went to drink, because he could not see through its frosted windows. He preferred to sit at one of the bars that were open to the street, with chairs and tables spilling out onto the footpath. There he could watch the passing parade of mainly Chinese young women, who went there to be admired in mini-skirts or hip-hugging jeans that showed their bare midriffs. But Yusuf liked the atmosphere of the Cantina, a more traditional bar, catering to older drinkers, and felt safer there. He reasoned that if he sat at street-side in full view of people walking by, he could be spotted by religious police looking for Malays drinking alcohol before he had a chance to push his whisky glass towards Scott. So when they drank together, Scott usually agreed to meet at the Cantina.

Two days after Anwar's court appearance he arrived at the Cantina to have a pre-dinner drink with Yusuf and found him staring morosely into a glass of Johnny Walker Black Label.

"You don't look very happy," Scott remarked.

"Our religious zealots have announced a new campaign to catch more couples committing khalwat," his friend said. "I can see a day when these buggers, with the usual lynch mob of local vigilantes, come charging through the doors and windows of my house and catch me in bed with Hayati."

Yusuf and Hayati, who owned a clothing boutique catering to Kuala Lumpur's wealthier women, were both divorced and averse to marrying again. They had separate homes but spent weekends together, either at Yusuf's house or Hayati's apartment.

"Don't worry about it. They aren't going to launch raids on your ritzy area."

"That is something I wouldn't bet on, given the diabolical minds of these medieval mullahs. And on top of this potential calamity I have just received a letter from my son saying the 50,000 Australian dollars he borrowed from me to invest in a Sydney restaurant with some friends has gone down the gurgler as a result of the collapse of the business. Fifty thousand may not sound a lot to you but the loss of what I regarded as a safe loan is a hell of a kick in the butt for me. Additionally, my ex-wife, who, you know, is living in a luxury Vaucluse apartment, said she

regretted my misfortune but reminded me that I was overdue on my next maintenance payment.”

Preoccupied with his own family problems, Scott could summon little sympathy for Yusuf.

“At least your son hasn’t broken up with his wife.”

“Are you still fretting over that. These days, separation or divorce isn’t a big deal. Why can’t you just accept the fact that two people no longer want to live together.”

“It’s not just that.” Scott spoke so vehemently that Yusuf put down the glass that he had been raising to his lips.

“What is it, then?”

“My son has decided he’s gay,” Scott blurted out.

Yusuf stared at him for a moment. “Is that all? From your attitude, I reckoned he must have robbed a bank.”

“I would have been less baffled by something as relatively straight-forward as that.”

“There’s nothing unusual or puzzling about someone being gay in this day and age.”

“But he’s married with three children.”

“Anwar’s married with six children.”

“That’s a different matter. We don’t even know if the charges against him are true.”

“You’re a journalist. Nothing in this world should surprise you. But you surprise me. I always had the idea that you were level-headed and liberal in your beliefs about religion, sex and people’s right to do what they choose.”

“I am liberal and I’ve always taken a tolerant attitude towards homosexuals,” Scott asserted. “My daughter called me homophobic but that’s not true. My outlook is completely at odds with people who show their hatred of homosexuals in vilification or violent acts. Two recent examples of homophobia particularly appalled me. There was the incident of an Australian politician who accused a High Court judge, whom he knew to be gay, of looking for young male prostitutes in Sydney’s Darlinghurst area. His evidence was a document that turned out to be forged. Under parliamentary privilege, this highly respected legal figure had his reputation smeared. I sympathised strongly with the judge and considered the politician’s action reprehensible.

“Then there was a nasty case in Sydney in which a man shouted obscenities at a gay neighbour, threw faeces at the entrance to his flat and abused him in other ways over a long period of time. He was brought to court but only had to pay a small fine. I was disturbed that these kind of acts did not incur greater penalties.

“I’m not a practising Catholic or Muslim or member of any other sect so I don’t have any religious objections to men or women having homosexual relations. But this is my son we’re talking about. How could he be possibly attracted to the disgusting practices of homosexuality?”

Yusuf gave a derisive snort. “You sound just like Mahathir talking about Anwar. You know what I think? I think in your case it’s the NIMBY factor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not in my back-yard. In Australia, people tell you they have no objection to Asian immigration but when they find out that a Chinese or Japanese has become their neighbour they get very upset. You say you have a tolerant attitude to homosexuals but it doesn’t apply in the case of your son. It’s too close to home. ‘Not my son - he can’t possibly be gay.’

“Exactly because he is my son, I can say I have never seen any sign of unusual sexual behaviour in him. He was a normal boy and young man.”

“You know as well as I do that it is common for gay people to hide their sexuality for many years - especially from their parents. You just don’t want to accept the simple fact that you have a gay son.”

“How can you call it a simple fact?”

“Because it is.” Yusuf paused and gave Scott a sympathetic smile.

“I think the NIMBY factor is only a small part of the problem,” he said. “I believe it goes deeper than that.”

Scott did not reply.

“Subconsciously, you are troubled about your manhood. You are asking yourself: ‘If my son is gay, what does that make me.’”

“That’s nonsense.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll bet you’ve always regarded yourself as an exceptionally virile male and set out to prove this to yourself by inseminating every attractive female you could find as you galloped around Asia over the past umpteen years. Now your son tells you he is gay and it undermines your sexual self-confidence. There’s no reason for you to be sexually insecure, I’m sure, but your son’s action has sown some doubt in your mind about who you are and what you are and that is making you angry with him.

“At the same time, you are feeling sorry for yourself because the world is not the way you would like it to be. You are intent on preserving the comfort zone you’ve created as a personal refuge - with everything in its place and a place for everything, as my Australian foster mother used to say. Your son has to be a nice, ‘normal’ boy. That is, he must conform to your criteria of nice and

normal. Anything else is unacceptable.”

“That’s all bullshit,” Scott declared with a testy edge in his voice.

“Okay, I won’t charge you for my opinion,” Yusuf said. “But you can buy me another whisky.”

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