

Chapter 30

One Romantic Young Lady Endures a Rebuff
Another is Broken by Despair

The Ngs were simple, kind, hard-working people. William was at home with them almost at once. Mr Ng enrolled him at the high school in Aberdeen for the coming school year, and William, somewhat tense and mentally logging the exits for a quick flight, went to the government office and got a re-issue of his i.d. card, putting the Ngs' address on the form. There was no trouble. Mr Ng went to an attorney to start the process for legal adoption.

“When conditions allow, we’ll go across the border to my clan temple, and you can pay your respects. Just a formality, to appease my ancestors. Doesn’t mean you have to take the name.”

“Are you sure the temple’s still there?” asked William. “All the temples in my own town were smashed up in the Cultural Revolution.”

Mr Ng waved away the Cultural Revolution. “That’ll all blow over,” he said. “It’s nothing. Our family temple was closed for a while, I believe. But my clan is very strong around Foshan. They will take care of the temple, don’t worry. Next New Year, maybe we’ll go over.”

Foshan was Mr Ng’s native place, a big town in Guangdong Province.

The bunk bed arrangement was awkward, and William thought it might be embarrassing at first. The thing was structured with a double bed on the bottom, where the Ngs slept, and a single one on top, for William. So he was right over them, and could hardly have avoided know-

ing about it if they made *tongfang* while he was there. Mr Ng cleared this up the first week.

“Do you know about the private relations between men and women?” he asked William one evening, when Mrs Ng was out visiting.

William said he thought he understood the essentials well enough.

“Good. Then you will understand if I tell you this. Sunday is our day off. Sunday we lie in late. I want you to get up early on Sunday and take a walk. Around eight o’clock. Get up, take a steamed bun or a batter-stick, and go take a nice long walk. If it’s raining, take a waterproof. Walking in the rain is good for the lungs, very healthful. Close the front door behind you. If you come back and the door is still closed, go walk some more. Don’t come back in until the door is open. Understand?”

“Sure. No problem.”

William’s own state, his new state of perfect celibacy, was a relief at first, after Bina’s attentions. He did not give a single thought to those things, after the conversation with Mr Ng. Until Bina suddenly reappeared.

William was trying to find a job, to supplement the family income until school started, and he had been out in Aberdeen chasing some leads. Returning, coming along the corridor that ran the length of the sixth floor, he saw Bina at the door, ringing the bell. The Ngs were both out at work. Bina was under full canvas: one of her finest saris, magenta and chartreuse slashed with bright tangerine, all flecked with gold, and her gold hair ornaments and gold and silver bangles all the way up her forearm.

“I’ve been worried about you,” said Bina when she saw him. “Leaving so suddenly like that. Not coming back to let me know how you’re getting on.”

“I’m getting on all right,” said William. “Papa Wu could have told you that.”

“Not the same thing.” She came right up to him, took his hands in both of hers, and smiled up at him. “Not the same thing at all.”

There was a face, one of the neighbors at her kitchen window. “Let’s go for a walk,” said William. “This is not the right place.”

He led her down the stairs to the courtyard. It was full of children playing. They walked across, and started down the hill toward Aberdeen.

“You’re a bad boy,” said Bina. “I’m sure you haven’t thought of me even a little.”

“Well, I’ve been getting used to my new life,” replied William, deliberately not contradicting her.

“New life! Weren’t you happy enough with me?”

“Doing what? You were out all day long. I was just sitting there watching TV.”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be like that. I was thoughtless. I can set you up in the company I’m working with. We need more Chinese staff. You can make some money. Do something interesting.”

It dawned on William—a revelation!—that Bina was *pleading* with him. He stopped dead—they were halfway down the hill—and turned to face her.

“What are you saying? That I should come back?”

“Of course you should come back! What else will you do? Live in that slum the rest of your life?” She pointed back up the hill. “I can make something of you, William.” She lowered her eyes. “I’m sorry I neglected you so shamelessly before. It won’t be like that now.” Smiling up at him again, something quite new in her eyes—something yearning, and a bit scary. “It won’t be like that now.”

“Why, Bina? Why do you want me back so much? You came all this way, and . . . why?”

Amazingly, unexpectedly, she flung her arms round him, pressing her face down on his shoulder. “Because I love you, you stupid boy! I love you! Don’t you understand?” His nostrils were filled with her scent, the heavy exotic scent, overlaid now with some elements of perspiration—it was a very hot day.

Terrified, William pushed her away, so hard she almost fell over. He ran off down to the town, hearing her screaming behind him. “*William! WILLIAM! Don’t, oh don’t! I need you, I love you! Come back, please come back!*” He could hear it until he reached the town, and lost himself in the crowds.

William thought about this a lot in the days that followed. This woman, whom he had thought so worldly, so sophisticated—she was in love with him! He could not help but feel pleased with himself. Who

would feel otherwise, after such a confession? William began to regret his impulsive retreat. The poor woman! Perhaps she would kill herself in despair, and her ghost come to haunt him, like something out of *Strange Tales from Liao's Studio*. He began looking at himself in the mirror, the simple plastic-framed mirror that hung on the wall in the Ngs' bathroom. Handsome—yes: his face smooth and unblemished, teeth white and more or less even, his shoulders broadening, arms and chest thickening. Well, it was understandable. Certainly he had done his best to satisfy her. Three, four times every day. Five times one day, he was sure. Perhaps only Chinese men were so virile. Perhaps Indian men couldn't satisfy her like that. No, that couldn't be right: Mr Ng was Chinese, and he only did it once a week. Still, it was understandable.

With his thoughts running on these lines, and the stunned enervation of the weeks with Bina now a month in the past, certain natural and instinctive forces began to reassert themselves. Soon William was at school again—a co-educational school, with a statistically predictable proportion of very pretty girls and handsome boys. The teachers were dull, William was far ahead of his classmates in the most important subjects, and he found it difficult to keep his concentration. In the third week of October, he buckled.

Papa Wu was in the lounge of Washington Guest House, alone, when William knocked on the glass door. Papa Wu got up and let him in.

"Everything all right?" he asked, with that wary about-to-be-imposed-on look.

"Oh, yes. Everything's fine. I get on very well with the Ngs. We're doing a formal adoption."

"Good, good!" Papa Wu nodded vigorous, and no doubt relieved, approval.

"It's only that . . ." William cleared his throat. "Miss Bina. I left something here. If I could just ask her . . ."

"Miss Bina?" Papa Wu threw back his head and laughed. "Forget it!"

"I'm sorry?"

"She's gone, that's what!"

"Gone?" (*Killed herself! For love of him!*) "Gone where?"

"Got married. Mr Dipoo, do you know him?"

“I . . . No, I don’t think so.”

“Rich guy. Imports precious stones. Got a big place up in mid-levels. Came here to walk out with her—oh, three or four times. Next thing, they were married. It was in the newspaper, *Hong Kong Standard*, a couple of weeks ago. So fast! And her with no dowry. For the *achas* that’s important, you know. The woman must bring a dowry. But I guess Mr Dipoo has so much money he doesn’t care about the dowry. Or maybe she bewitched him, like she did you. Ha ha ha! Anyway, there they are in mid-levels—married.”

“Oh.”

“Of course, I could look in the room if you like. But I’m sure she took everything with her.”

* * *

The Ngs were not, in fact, badly off. Mr Ng earned four hundred a month at the godown, Mrs Ng half as much doing piece work, packing in a toy factory. They paid the government a hundred a month rent for their apartment, and carried no debts. Mr Ng drank a bottle of beer whenever he got the chance—average one a day, probably—and smoked rather immoderately. However, he did not gamble; not even mahjong, the principal enemy of family budgeting in Hong Kong. His wife dressed modestly and kept a frugal house. From a chance remark, William gathered that they had saved a great deal for their son’s operation, and had used only a small part of it for the funeral. There were smart new utensils and gadgets in the apartment: a patented thermos flask that poured at the press of a button; a big radio/cassette player on which Mr Ng liked to listen to Cantonese opera and American Country and Western music; an ingenious shower worked by a foot pump. For William’s sixteenth birthday in October they all went to one of the floating restaurants in Aberdeen harbor, for a meal that cost a hundred and fifty dollars, with shark fin soup and French brandy.

“It’s not just your birthday, it’s your welcome to our family,” said Mr Ng, raising his brandy glass.

For all that, William had fallen some way from the life he had been used to in Kowloon Tong. He noticed this most at school. His old school

had been a good one, he vaguely knew. However, it had been the only school he knew in the Colony, so he had had no standard of comparison. It had just seemed to him to be as bright, clean, new and efficient as everything else in Hong Kong. Now he understood how lucky he had been. Not that the Aberdeen school was disgraceful in any way. It was merely dirty, crowded, under-staffed and under-funded. There were sixty to a class. The teachers were overworked and underpaid. They droned through their lessons, mostly just reading through the textbooks. Few could speak English, and none of those few could speak it well. Most, indeed, could not speak Mandarin with any facility; and there was even one, old Mr Sung the history teacher, whose very Cantonese slipped in and out of comprehensibility, he being a villager from the mainland with some exotic local dialect, which he had left behind only in middle age.

The classmates were a mixed bunch. There was a rough element, slum kids from the waterfront. There were some Hakkas from the New Territories, diligent and well-behaved but clannish. There were even a few Egg People, who lived on the boats moored in the harbor. Most, however, were from families like the Ngs: honest working people who could afford nothing better. They were diligent in their studies, and a few showed real promise. Overall, though, the standard was not what William had been used to. He was far ahead of his classmates—and of his teachers, for that matter—in both math and English, and his being a Mandarin speaker excused him from that class altogether.

His good looks and comparative academic brilliance secured him a light sort of popularity, some occasional envy, and a great many admirers among the female classmates. By the end of the first term he could confidently name five girls who he knew were in love with him, and had deep suspicions of two or three of the boys. They were an unworldly crowd, though, confined, out of school hours, to the crowded apartments of the resettlement estates or the even worse, older, private buildings in Aberdeen itself, and there were few opportunities for dalliance, even if anyone had known how to go about it. So all the yearnings and longings, all that fine romantic passion, hung suspended in the stuffy air of the classrooms and the ill-lit murk of the corridors.

William had, in any case, been deterred in some way by the business with Bina. This man-woman thing was far more complicated than he had allowed for, with much more to know. This complexity, this unpredictability, scared him. He bent himself to study, aiming to take four subjects at Advanced after two years at the school. The math would give him no problem; but the physics needed work and travel (the school shared a lab with two others), and the Advanced English included three texts from Literature, one by Mr William Shakespeare that he couldn't make head nor tail of on a first reading.

His closest friendship at the school was with Fong. It had not (so it seemed to him at any rate, looking back on things later) it had not been his initiative that started things. Fong had taken him up, seeking him out to sit next to in class, hastening to catch up with him in the corridors. Fong looked up to him in some odd way.

"You seem so worldly," said Fong one time. "You pretend not to be, but I can see you are. You seem to know things I won't know till I'm forty!"

"That's nonsense," said William, not altogether comfortable with this line of talk. "I'm the same age as you. I live with my family in Aberdeen, that's all."

"Everybody says you're a swimmer."

"All right, I'm a swimmer. It's not a big deal, and not a big secret. Fuk Loying's a swimmer, too. You don't call him worldly."

"He's just a peasant from a village. You're sophisticated. Your English is so good! Half the girls are in love with you, do you know that?"

"Not half, only five of them. I know who: Ho Cheuiyip, Jang Tinfa, . . ."

Fong was laughing. "You should be more modest, Wailam. Or, you should take advantage of them."

Fong was good-looking himself: tall, though a little thinner than the ideal. He had a shy smile that was very charming, and a kind of wry, irreverent humor that William liked very much. He had his own admirers among the girl classmates. There was one in particular, who used the English name Lucy, who seemed to dote on him. Many times William saw her gazing dreamily across the classroom at Fong; twice or three times she saw him seeing her, and turned away hastily with a quick pinched

frown. William thought Lucy did not like him, perhaps because Fong did. However it was, Fong seemed to be quite oblivious of Lucy's attentions, and never mentioned her.

Nothing might have happened but for the picnic at New Year. The classmates went on a picnic trip to Tapmun Island, far out in the east of the New Territories. Like most islands, Tapmun had a fishing village, two or three scanty beaches, and a great many rocks. The classmates barbecued on a hilltop, then went off in little groups exploring. William and Fong, with Lucy and one of the girls who was in love with William tagging along, climbed down to one of the beaches. It was rough and stony, with an arc of smooth flat rocks curving round to a hundred yards out, making a kind of tiny bay.

"I'm going for a swim," said William on impulse. The others all laughed at him. "In February?" said Fong. "It'll be freezing cold."

"And so rough," said William's girl. "Look at the waves! It's dangerous. I really don't think it's a good idea."

"Well, I feel like a swim." William was already stripping off. He stripped to his underpants (the girls giggling, their hands pressed to their cheeks in mock outrage). The water was certainly colder than he had expected, but by no means freezing. William struck out for the rocks. When he reached them, he climbed up and stood on top of the flattest one to wave at the three on the shore. But there were only two; Fong had stripped and gone into the water, too. He was not such a strong swimmer as William, though, and seemed to be making no progress against the waves, which were quite high. Watching him, William began to feel alarmed. He dived back in and swam over to where Fong was flailing away ineffectually, in the wrong direction altogether now.

"Take a break," he said to Fong. "Don't exhaust yourself. Float on your back. Press the water down slowly with your hands, and keep your body straight. Good, good. Head back, belly up—relax! Now just back-stroke slowly, like this. Straight back, back to the shore. I'll tell you when you can touch bottom."

When they came out the girls were shrieking in panic, or simulated panic. William and Fong laughed to reassure them. William thought the girls had not noticed him helping Fong; but then he saw Lucy looking at

him with pure hatred. Such a strange business, this man-woman thing! But William's rescue, or his tact, had made a deep impression on Fong. From this point on there was something earnest about Fong's attachment to him, something unconditional.

On the way back from Tapmun, Lucy fell asleep in the minibus from Taipou, her head on Fong's shoulder. It was dark when they reached Kowloon; midnight when William got back to Aberdeen; then it was New Year, the year of the tiger.

In the summer term there was another picnic, this time to Poutoi Island. Poutoi was even more remote than Tapmun, so remote there was no ferry service. They had to hire a sampan in Aberdeen harbor and chug across several miles of open sea. Only seven classmates ventured on this trip, five boys and two girls. The two girls were attached to two of the boys; neither Lucy nor any of William's conquests made the trip. After the barbecue everyone wandered off in different directions. William and Fong explored a small cove with a cave going back from it. At the back of the cave was a tunnel, sand almost up to the roof, through which could just be made out a neighboring cove, the booming of the waves oddly refracted through the tunnel.

They sat on dry sand by the cave entrance, out of the sun.

"It's too bad Lucy couldn't come," said William.

Fong shrugged. "Lucy's a pest. Always hanging around me."

"Don't you like her?"

"Not that way."

William laughed. "Now it's my turn to tell *you* to take advantage. Since she's clearly willing."

"You shouldn't say that. I don't want any of that business. Not till I'm into college, anyway. Too much distraction."

"But you've played anti-aircraft, haven't you?" asked William, using the common Cantonese expression for self-abuse.

Embarrassed, Fong looked down, and dug his fingers into the sand. "Sure. Of course. Everybody does. Not very polite to talk about it."

"Oh, come on! If everybody does it, why not talk about it? Is talking worse than doing?"

“I guess not.” Fong hadn’t looked up. He was running the sand through his fingers, distractedly. William felt no better than half sure about Fong, and he had really wanted to be more sure than that. Yet . . . something in the eyes, when he could catch them. More than half sure. But the thing that he had been missing for many months, he was missing very much indeed now. Well, give it a try. He felt the breath tight in his throat.

“Have you ever done it with somebody else?”

His nightmare was, that Fong would jump to his feet, eyes blazing, and storm off to denounce him to the classmates. Get him thrown out of the school, possibly. But Fong only sat there in the bright shadow, sifting the dry white sand through his fingers.

“No,” he said after a short pause. Then, looking up now: “Have you?”

“Sure. Why not? It’s fun. No harm in it.”

“I don’t know.” Sifting sand again.

Now William felt sure. He opened his zipper. His *jiba* was stiff. “Look, he said. Oh, Fong, come on. Do it for me. I really want you to.”

Fong looked. William thought he was breathing hard.

“Do you really think it’s all right? I don’t know.” He looked over at William, and William knew everything would be fine.

“Of course. Of course it’s all right.” He took Fong’s hand and pulled it over, closing it round his *jiba*. The fingers were rough with sand, but this proved not to matter very much, as the thrill was so exquisite William’s juice flew out immediately.

“Do it for me. Do it for me.” Fong was thoroughly into the spirit of the thing now, fumbling with his own zipper. William reached in and felt Fong’s *jiba*. It was as hard as his own had been. “Oh, oh, oh,” said Fong, and fell back on the sand with his hands over his face. “Oh, oh.” William pulled out the organ and stroked it three or four times. Then he leaned over and took it in his mouth. He played on it for a while with his tongue and lips, then tasted Fong’s juice gushing hot across his tongue and palate. When it was finished he repacked and zippered up Fong, who had become quite inert, and then rearranged himself.

“Come on,” he said. “We’d best be getting back.”

Fong was just lying there, his hands over his face. “I’m so ashamed,” he said through his hands. “So ashamed.”

“Oh, for what? It’s only a bit of fun. You enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

Fong sat up. His face showed him distraught—near to tears, William thought.

“Yes. It was wonderful. But it’s wrong. You know it is. It’s against nature.”

“Oh, nonsense. Wearing clothes is against nature, isn’t it? Animals don’t wear clothes, not that I’ve noticed.”

“That’s different. Wearing clothes is customary. This—it’s not customary.”

“Who says not? What do you think Gam Wing in *Red Chamber Dream* is talking about, when he’s taunting Cheun Jung and Heung Lin? So Chinese people were doing it two hundred years ago. They didn’t think it was against nature.”

“I’m sure they did. You can’t judge from literature. Literature always exaggerates.”

They were sitting up on the sand, William rubbing at a small stain on his jeans.

“Don’t take it so seriously. It’s only a bit of fun. There’s no harm done. It’s not like with a girl, when you can get her pregnant. Don’t worry, you won’t get pregnant.”

To William’s immense relief, Fong laughed: not a nervous or defensive laugh, a giggle of real amusement. Then: “You planned this from the beginning, didn’t you? When we all split up after the barbecue?”

“No. It was just opportunism.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re so sly. I thought you just wanted to be friends.”

“Well, we are friends, aren’t we? Who better to make *hangfong* with, than your friend?” [Using the Cantonese term.] “I mean, we trust each other, don’t we?”

“Don’t call it *hangfong*. It’s not *hangfong*.”

“Well, it’s near enough. But we can do *hangfong*, too, if you like.”

“No, no.” Fong stood up abruptly. “No, that’s really unnatural.” He seemed disturbed and unsettled again. William wished he had not mentioned *hangfong*.

“All right.” He stood up. “Let’s get back.”

* * *

Now more than ever missing that thing, William planned carefully. On a blazing Sunday morning in June, he took a trip to Kowloon with Fong, to window-shop in Nathan Road. Riding over on Star Ferry, he rolled the dice. "Let's do it again," he said.

"Do what?"

"You know. What we did on Poutoi Island."

"What, here?" Fong laughed. They were leaning on the rail, watching the approach to Kowloon. "You're crazy."

"Of course not here. But I know a place nearby where we can go."

"Where?"

"In Kowloon. Nathan Road. Come on. It's a bit of fun, that's all."

Fong said nothing. He said nothing coming off the ferry, and nothing walking up to Nathan Road. William turned in to Chungking Mansions. Instead of taking the elevator, he went round to the stairs at the back. This was a mistake: the stairs were filthy, garbage everywhere. It made the whole enterprise seem seedy. Still Fong said nothing, following three or four paces behind. They went up three flights to Princess Guest House. There was an old Chinese woman at the desk, her face so dark it was almost black, creased and folded like a lizard's. Expressionless, she took the money for one hour's rental, and handed over a key.

"Room Seven," she said, in a thick Shandong accent.

Fong was hanging back. William went to room seven and opened the door. Fong obviously had to pluck up his courage to get past the old woman. He need not have troubled himself. The old woman had seen everything since fleeing her home village as a child, back in the warlord period sixty years previously. Everyone had had to flee because there was no water to be had. The reason there was no water was that the village well was clogged with corpses. She had had her feet bound, then unbound when it was too late to save them from deformity. She had been sold twice, the first time at age nine to a brute who had invited his drinking friends in to watch while he deflowered her. She had buried him, and two more husbands, and eight children besides, and was now content to sit here in silence all day waiting for Lord Yanwang, the Emperor of Hell,

to summon her to join her ancestors in his own good time. Fong would have fired no spark of interest in her withered soul if he had been a dromedary.

William closed the door and locked it. Turning, he saw Fong standing in the middle of the room, an expression of anguish on his face.

“Oh, Wailam. I’m really not sure.”

“It’s all right. Come on, let’s take a shower together. It’ll relax you.”

William began to undress. From the corner of his eye he saw that Fong, after some hesitation, was following his example. When both were naked they stood facing each other. Fong had a pleasant body: pale and smooth, slim but well-built, marred only by a small appendix scar. His *jiba* was already stiff. When William saw this he knew he could not wait.

“Let’s lie on the bed,” he said, aware that his voice was not normal.

“I thought you wanted to take a shower.”

“Shower afterwards.”

Assuming Fong would need instruction, William had the whole thing choreographed in his mind. To his surprise, however, Fong took the initiative, rolling them over and then, after some tangling and untangling, ending up on top of William, both of them face down. After half a dozen strokes he climaxed, moaning and gasping hot into William’s ear. William spent himself more or less simultaneously, from ecstasy and friction with the bedclothes. They lay there together for a while, gasping.

Suddenly Fong jumped up and ran to the minuscule shower cubicle. The water started running. William got up slowly and walked over to the cubicle. It was so small, there was room only for one at a time.

“So disgraceful, so disgraceful.” Fong sounded as if he were sobbing.

“Oh, come on. You wanted to.”

“Yes. I wanted to. That’s what’s so disgraceful. Oh! Oh!”

“Hey. It’s all right.” William tried to edge into the cubicle.

“No, no, don’t come in. It’s too small, anyway.”

“All right. I only wanted to tell you, it’s all right.”

“You want to do it to me, don’t you? What I did to you, you want to do it to me.”

“No. No, I don’t. I already had *gouchiu*. I’ve finished. I just don’t like to see you upset.”

Fong pushed his way out, leaving the water running. The tiny, windowless room was full of steam. Fong took a towel from the rail set helpfully next to the bed, and began pummeling his hair.

“You’re evil. You *seduced* me,” he said. Now he sounded angry, William thought. One minute angry, one minute blubbing in self-reproach, one minute squirting his juice into your bottom. What kind of guy was this? He began to regret having taken up Fong. Annoyed, he went into the shower. When he came out, Fong was dressed and lacing his shoes.

“Please, William, please don’t say anything about this to anyone.”

“Of course not. It’s just between us two.”

“I’m so ashamed, so ashamed.”

“There’s no need. You enjoyed it and I enjoyed it. What’s to be ashamed for?”

“So filthy! So disgusting!”

“Not at all. We took a shower, didn’t we? I can’t see what you’re so excited about.” William thought he was not keeping the irritation out of his voice.

“I don’t know what kind of life you’ve lived. But my life isn’t like that. If my family knew—oh!” Fong stood up. He shot William a strange, bleak look, then wrestled with the door for a while before getting it open. William, still naked, backed off to be out of sight from the doorway. Fong paused in the doorway.

“I really wish I’d never met you.” And he gave William that same look: eyes wide and mobile, head at a slight angle. He left.

What a neurotic, thought William as he dressed. But worth it, well worth it, all things considered. He recycled the memory of Fong’s slim, pale body, and of the wonderful satisfaction of Fong inside him. Definitely worth it, neurotic or not.

He did not think much of it when Fong failed to show up at classes the following Monday. When on Tuesday Fong still did not show, William felt a tremor of apprehension. He asked a classmate who lived in the same resettlement block as Fong.

“No idea,” said the classmate. “He didn’t say anything to me.”

It was this same classmate who gave them the news later in the week. Fong’s dead body had been found on Poutoi Island. He had taken a boat

out there on Monday afternoon, telling the boat to come back for him. Once there he had found a secluded cove, then cut his wrists and his throat. Inexpertly, it appeared, as he had eventually died from exposure, not exsanguination. The sampan had gone back for him; but when he hadn't been there to meet it, had gone blithely back to Aberdeen. Some fishing people had found him on Wednesday morning.

William crept around for some days in a condition of cold terror. This was not conscience: he honestly did not feel he had anything to be conscience-stricken about. It was only that he feared the discovery of a note, a letter, a diary, a confession. He also feared Lucy, who had become very strange since the news: red-eyed, distracted, jumping up to leave class suddenly, taking sudden absences. She looked at him with a new look now, a look that seemed, to him, to contain elements of accusation and comprehension, and William did his utmost to avoid her altogether. Soon this was no longer necessary. In the last week of the summer term Lucy jumped from the roof of her resettlement block. One of the low-grade Chinese tabloids, the one favored by Mr Ng, ran a picture of the girl's dead body, her skirt up exposing her bare legs and underwear, her brains hanging loose from her burst skull. The first of these effects had been arranged by the newspaper photographer following payment of a small bribe to the police detective supervising the scene; the second was a consequence of having fallen twelve floors onto bare concrete.

"Such a terrible thing," said Mrs Ng. "Who can understand it?"