

The 15th Annual Anniversary

XU XI

for Felix

He had gone, against his better judgment, to their high school class's 35th reunion dinner. Only because F was persistent. His emails and Facebook bulletins during the past year had subtly ratcheted up the pressure, culminating with an offer to pay for Christopher's share to attend, which was not cheap, never cheap, when it came to these boys of La Salle. But F was doing well in Seattle—happily married, adorable twin girls aged nine, a systems engineer in Boeing's senior management—unlike Christopher, who had never ventured farther than Macau, at least not for almost thirty years, who'd never finished university, but who still managed to scrape by thanks to his steady, dead-end job at home in Hong Kong.

They were all there, F and R and D and B and many others who were well established, a few socially prominent, sucking up champagne as they gazed out over Victoria Harbour, high up at the bar of the Upper House. Christopher had heard of but never been to this boutique hotel, this playground of those who had arrived. They were all there, these boys pushing fifty, laughing about the Maryknoll girls they had once lusted after, recalling old rivalries with the boys of DBS or Wah Yan, indulging in a shared past when life was still the promise of a bright future for those who survived the public exams and

climbed the steps of secondary education in their crowd of elite 名校 “name schools” toward university. Christopher was only in touch with F now. R and D barely remembered him, and B nodded in recognition at the boy whose English homework he used to crib. Christopher Woo’s English had always been good because his father was a judge, now long retired, and his mother . . . but that was the problem.

Christopher wandered away from F across the large, atrium-like space toward the hors d’oeuvres. His stomach was sour, unused as it was to champagne. A 35th year was no big deal, but this year coincided with “the 15th annual anniversary” of the handover of the city from Britain back to China in 1997. Christopher had laughed out loud at the redundancy. “Anniversaries *are* annual,” he emailed F, but his comment was ignored. Just as it would be here among the post-colonials, these neo-colonials of China. He picked up a menu from one of the tables and there it was again: “15th annual anniversary.” Christopher knew that language had been abandoned for more urgent pleasures. A 15th anniversary was not necessarily that big a deal, either, but this year also coincided with the changeover to the city’s third chief executive since the return to China after British rule. That *was* a big deal because their former classmate, a boy who had not spoken to Christopher in the eleven years they were in school together, had been anointed to the inner circle of the new government, a member of the true, and overpaid, elite. So this was the Thursday before the ceremony Sunday, and their classmate could get drunk and have time to slough off his hangover before having to appear respectable again.

Christopher nibbled on a caviar tart. His jacket sleeve hung a tad too long and was slightly smeared with horseradish from the smoked fish savory he’d scooped up. He dabbed at the sleeve with a paper napkin, which made the stain worse. Only a dry cleaner could fix it now, but he knew F wouldn’t mind, the way F never seemed to mind about anything. They had become friends-for-life at nine when F beat up an older boy who circled Christopher with a bully brigade at recess in the toilet. F told him, “Don’t be afraid. I’ll take care of you,” and each year when F made the pilgrimage home to visit his parents, he called Christopher, hung out with him for a few evenings, and listened to him talk about his life before flying back to his own life in Seattle. They were even Facebook friends, the only one of Christopher’s social media milieu who wrote him in English, not Chinese, and who lived the kind of life Christopher knew he should live but couldn’t.

He could almost wear F's suit jackets and shirts, which was odd because F was taller but had a short torso and long legs while Christopher had a long upper body and slightly shorter arms. All F's clothes were tailored, just as Christopher's father had a tailored wardrobe. Father had liked F a lot, and Mother did, too, back when his family lived together in the big house on Flint Road—walking distance to La Salle—where F liked to hang out with him after school and where, on Thursdays, they spied upon girls through his father's binoculars, watched them in their butt-revealing ballet tunics at the dance school across the road. Christopher didn't want to have to think about Mother anymore now that she was dead.

F came by the hors d'oeuvres table asking, "So what do you think of this?" meaning the city's new chief executive. F was sociable and successful, but he didn't always think highly of all their former classmates, which was why, Christopher assumed, they were still friends. F kept on talking—wasn't this view amazing, didn't B look fit, how did Christopher like that caviar tart—until his eyes landed on the stained sleeve and he paused. Christopher thought he looked annoyed, but that passed and then he was just F again, talking about his daughters who were taking ballet—one was good and the other had duck feet. They both laughed over Duck Lake, which had been F's sister's favorite joke, the younger sister who'd married a Frenchman, lived in Tokyo now, and worked for an international bank, the former Maryknoll girl Christopher had given his heart to until F had to tell him, "Stop. She's just not interested." That had ended Christopher's teenaged love life; he hadn't met anyone since who compared, which was what he told F whenever F asked if he was seeing anyone.

B joined them at the table, and from their conversation Christopher was surprised to find that F and B had been in touch a lot more over the years than he knew. B worked for a major developer now and made a lot of money; he'd come a long way from the resettled refugee life of his youth in public housing. La Salle used to be like that, education for all even though it was a 名校, government-funded. The Catholics were like that. Now, B's parents lived in a luxury flat, paid for entirely by B. Christopher hadn't even known that F knew B's family, or that they'd hung out back in school. All he knew was that B's English had been lousy but he'd aced Chinese, which hadn't been Christopher's good subject, and they'd tutored each other, cribbing one another's notes to get through the exams. Mother only spoke to him in impeccable Queen's English. B was saying to F, "My mother has arthritis, but I suppose that's normal when

you get older,” and F was telling him about his mother’s acid reflux and how he’d told her to stop eating so much, and they both laughed. Christopher was still nibbling on the caviar tart.

“Are you ever going to finish that?” B asked before wandering off to join another group.

At dinner Christopher sat next to F. The butter knife, soup spoon, fish and meat knives and forks, and dessert spoon and fork were all correctly placed, the way he knew silverware should be laid. His mother was Eurasian and had insisted on laying both an English and Chinese table correctly, and she’d made sure Christopher learned.

“I went by your old house yesterday,” F told him. “It’s a school now.”

Christopher was surprised. He hadn’t been anywhere near the house for at least two decades, if not longer. At first, after his parents split up, he had gone by all the time, until F told him, “Stop. Forget about it,” agreeing that Christopher’s father’s behavior was “unconscionable.” Christopher had liked that word, “unconscionable.” It accurately described the cause of his mother’s plight even though Mother was, of course, mad, *crazy* he meant, nuts, completely off her rocker. By the time Father had made the affair with Dr. Cheung’s sister public and left them, abandoned him to the nothingness of life with Mother, it was an open secret that she was nuts. He was only sixteen then but couldn’t abandon Mother. She clung to him ferociously in any case, said he owed his life to her. Her family wouldn’t help, had long ago disinherited her. They were all crazy, too, in any case, she and her four sisters, all wildly extravagant, spending the last of their grandfather’s wealth on designer clothes and shoes and bags instead of jewelry they could at least have pawned. The one surviving maternal aunt had wandered the streets of Tsimshatsui, homeless. When Christopher occasionally sighted her, he gave her cash, but she was the *completely* loony one, beyond all hope.

The Flint Road home had belonged to Father’s family. Father took what jewelry there was, along with Mother’s Hong Kong Shanghai Bank shares—“for the medical bills,” he said. When Mother’s skin condition first erupted at the age of twelve—“like leprosy,” he’d told F at the time, even though it wasn’t—Dr. Cheung, who lived two houses down, had treated her. She got better but kept buying things, once spending two months of Father’s salary in one afternoon on ball gowns and ten pairs of evening shoes. His parents had fought late into the early morning when Mother ran out to the driveway

in nothing but her underwear. Only her amah's urging got her back inside. Mother's personal amah from girlhood, who died soon afterwards from old age and a broken heart over Mother.

Father had given Christopher a choice. "Leave her," he said. "She belongs in Castle Peak," meaning the insane asylum, but Christopher didn't think his mother was *that* crazy and didn't want to see her shut away. Then Dr. Cheung's sister, the nice Chinese (not Eurasian) girl from Maryknoll, finally succumbed to Father's urgings and had an affair with him so that Father could leave Mother, and him, to their fates. Christopher knew perfectly well that he did not live up to Father's standards academically, or otherwise, and probably never would. Once, maybe ten years or so after the abandonment, when Christopher had failed for the third time to finish a university degree despite stints at one British and two American academies, his father had said, "You'll never amount to anything," and finally abandoned him for good.

"So what do you think of our new CE?" F was saying. "You followed the election, right?"

Of course he had, he told F. How could he not, given his 24/7 media access, monitoring both print and electronic news, the one perk of his longtime job at the clipping service. How quaint that sounded. It had been a long time since he'd needed to "clip" a story out of a newspaper the way he used to for this international PR company that had kept him on—"has it really been twenty-five years already?"—because his English was fluent and he was literate in Chinese and could write research report summaries for their clients overseas from his back-room office or his computer at home. He wanted to tell F everything he had been thinking about the two contenders for the CE post—well, three really, but no one ever thought the third had a hope in hell—who'd blundered their way through an "election campaign" of teacup-storm proportions, but he didn't know how to say it. Christopher didn't even know what to say as F talked about his old home, the house he had loved so much as a child, with its high walls and second-floor bedroom where he could spy on the girls at ballet school across the road in the afternoon and dream in bed at night about F's sister, the girl who gave him all those wet dreams he couldn't tell F about. What did it matter, these silly scandals that the loser in this election was embroiled in, illegal structures in his home and revelations about some affair with an aide? Christopher knew from the time he was a boy that the affairs of state didn't matter. What mattered were what you had for breakfast and dinner and whether the table settings were correct for a Chinese or English banquet.

Now he gazed down at the silverware. Its expensive solidity provided an artful accent to this Upper House where, for a night, he was back where he belonged. With F and that life of the school they'd attended as boys, the school Father had attended as a boy and where Christopher's son would have attended had he had an heir. It was succession, this life of the elite, unless your mother went crazy and believed her skin condition was due to the poison fed her by her rival, Dr. Cheung's unmarried sister, who, when she visited her brother, was always elegantly dressed with just the right jewelry to accent her pure Chinese skin, skin unmarred by a leprosy-like ailment in which layers peeled off and the white of her cheeks were like those of a Chinese ghost.

The soup arrived—wild mushroom—and Christopher wondered if mushrooms were ever tame, although he didn't dare say this to F. He would have once, when F had laughed at all his jokes, but he suspected that these days F wouldn't laugh anymore. They weren't gay, he and F, although Christopher had wondered briefly about it because what he felt for F was nothing short of love, the way he loved all of F's family, who had always been nice to him. Even the sister would smile sweetly and say nice things if she happened to be around, and F's parents would politely ask after his mother, even though they knew she was crazy. He thought of them as his protectors the way F had been all those years ago in the playground. Some things didn't change, even though F had looked a little askance earlier at the smudged sleeve. Christopher almost offered to get it cleaned but remained mute, unable to say a word in the light of F's momentary, disapproving glare. But he was imagining. It wasn't a glare—it wasn't. F wasn't Father, who summoned up the judgment of a vengeful god when he glared at his son, this useless failure, this almost dead ringer for the wife he never forgave himself for marrying, this final scab that advertised his own loss of face, first as a husband, then as a father. F wasn't Father, the man who couldn't love back, despite all the love Christopher had surrendered to him. F wasn't Father, the coward who ran away. F was his friend for life and always would be.

The soup was too thin, rendering the mushroom flavor overly strong; of this much Christopher was sure. You didn't lose taste once it was bred into you, despite the years of neglect in between, just as he hadn't lost his ability to intuit when change was in the air, when something was wrong, unlike his father. Christopher had watched as Father headed toward the abandonment, struggling nightly to hold onto family, to do the right thing. Father should have understood that once you took the road less traveled, as he had with Mother, you couldn't turn back with impunity. Like F with him. Their annual reunions were always

exclusive evenings alone together, well, really, *evening*, singular, in the last few years. One day it had hit him that whenever F visited now, they never spent more than one evening alone, and hardly ever with F's wife or girls the way they used to when F and his wife were newly married.

Luckily F didn't ask him about the soup, and then the fish arrived, a choice of skate or rainbow trout, neither one seen that often on Hong Kong menus, although Christopher wouldn't have known. What he recalled was the taste of trout from the faraway time when Father still believed in him. Even Dr. Cheung's sister had believed in him, at least for a while, and she had, or so Christopher suspected, defended him to Father once she became the wife, usurping Mother's place officially so that she no longer had to blush in shame over her condition as a mistress and almost-spinster. Dr. Cheung's sister wasn't especially beautiful—certainly Mother in her day had been ten times lovelier—but she was educated and accomplished and a respectable member of society, the principal of the primary section at Maryknoll. She did not expect her husband to indulge unreasonable demands or the vicissitudes of a spoilt childhood among the formerly rich and famous, like Mother, who floated through life on the kind of beauty and glamour that makes the social pages for a brief, forgettable time. How Father must have been smitten with her! It had to be adoration, if not love, for him to defy his family and marry a woman who was half Chinese. Christopher chose the rainbow trout but was disappointed to find mere slices, deboned and topped by some fancy sauce in the guise of *nouveau cuisine*, instead of a whole fish.

F had taken him trout fishing once. This was when Christopher was still trying to finish a bachelor's degree at a university somewhere. Theater. Literature. Even philosophy. He tried one course in world religion but fell asleep in the middle of a mid-term exam while writing about the life of the Buddha. He dropped the class. During the semester break he and F had camped out by a lake and cooked trout over an open fire. That was living. That was something to write home about, not that he ever wrote home, not even to answer Mother's weekly, later daily, letters begging him to come home, saying that Father beat her, starved her, while *that woman* poisoned her tea with arsenic. He didn't respond. Later, she told him she was virtually penniless, that all she had to eat each day was rice gruel because Father was threatening to cut off her money. On and on it went until he finally came home for good and forgot about the life he was supposed to live, telling himself that he would go back to school later. He took one clerical job after another to earn the rent because by then, Father

really *had* cut off the money. Dr. Cheung's sister found him jobs. She was like that, compassionate if not beautiful, and a school principal knew a lot of people.

F was eating the skate. "This is delicious," he said, but the butterflyed corpse looked like a mutant squid to Christopher. The boys of La Salle were chattering loudly about the new CE, a man with initials in his name. They all had initials. It was no longer fashionable to use Anglo names; many of the non-Catholic boys had dropped the Bartholomews and Gabriels and Abrahams, these misnomers that had sounded grand to teenaged ears when being quasi-Anglo was the respectable, elitist thing to be. Now they were Y.Y. or M.B. or M.G.M. and quasi-fluent in Mandarin for all Christopher knew since he didn't know anyone other than the three standing next to F.

Now the red queen took over as an undoubtedly expensive, decanted red made its way around the tables while waiters hurried to change plates and pour the right wine for the steak that was marching its way out of the kitchen. Christopher was feeling a bodily heat from the white wine and champagne. Did they always eat and drink like this, these classmates who were no longer, who never had been, his friends? F had told the waiter, "He likes his medium rare," and there it was, the succulent flesh of cattle, flanked by asparagus spears and brussels sprouts. Brussels sprouts, like on *Leave It to Beaver* that he'd watched as a boy with Mother, afterward asking her to please, please make him brussels sprouts because he was curious to try this exotically named legume. She found frozen ones at Dairy Lane, the fancy supermarket next to Lane Crawford's in Tsimshatsui. How was it he could recall the minutiae of life before Mother went mad but couldn't remember what he ate for breakfast? Christopher stared at the steak, almost afraid to taste it.

"Aren't you hungry?" F asked, and Christopher was startled, because it suddenly seemed to him that F was really asking, "Aren't you grateful for this seat at my table?" No, he told himself, that wasn't it. F wasn't Father, who banished him forever from his table. F wasn't crazy like Mother, who died last Christmas, simply keeled over at the dinner table and expired. Christopher had sat, dumbstruck, until the smell of fecal matter spurred him into action. The arrangements! He had saved money for a proper Catholic funeral the way she'd insisted, promising her he *wouldn't* dump her body without ceremony, promising her he *would* publish a proper obituary in the *South China Morning Post*, as befitted her stature and fine family origins, so that her world could mourn her passing. He was true to his word. No one came to the funeral, not even Father. Only F sent flowers.

The boys of La Salle were toasting their classmate, the one who had never spoken a single word to Christopher in school and who hadn't said a word to him this evening, either. They rose in unison to honor him. Christopher remained seated. F nudged him into standing, which he did, reluctantly, not wanting to be rude to F. The whole room was like a stage, all of them play-acting some drama that had nothing to do with Christopher's real life. They were all here to keep the drama in motion, glad-handing handshakes and utterances that paved the way for themselves and their heirs. They were all here for the 15th annual anniversary and the 3rd ascension, dressed in their tailored and designer suits, their highly polished calf leather shoes, slipped on over socks that would be replaced when worn, not darned like Christopher's with a meticulous precision that would have startled, and perhaps even pleased, Father had he known, the kind of precision Father's excellent mind was capable of as he sat in judgment of everyone in this top-heavy city that was sinking under its own weight, where the sun rose in a reddish, reddened east, backlit from up north in Beijing. Christopher wanted to tell F that one day they would all be gone and another slate of boys would take their places, would try to keep their footing at the top of the hill where they now rose in unison for a military song of historical, long march struggles they had never known or wanted to know.

F nudged him to sit, because Christopher was the last one standing after the toast. The glances of pity by R, D, and B were not lost on Christopher as he slid back down, nor on F, he couldn't help noticing. No, not F. F did not pity him. Never. Dr. Cheung's sister, now *that* was pity. Father said she had *empathy* for the less fortunate students who were in her charge. But Christopher knew, when it came to him, that all she felt was that distant cousin, sympathy, pity's honorable twin.

The knife slid through the steak. *Slid*. It was soft and juicy and overwhelmingly large, but Christopher ate it all, surprised that so much food fit inside him at one sitting. "You need to eat more," F had said a few years earlier, shocked by how emaciated he'd looked. Christopher had shrugged and said it was nothing, only hard work caring for Mother as she aged, as physical ailments exacerbated her mental state. That was the year F had come to his home to visit him and Mother, when Christopher could see that F had had no idea how deteriorated Mother was, how the daily grind was truly that. F simply couldn't know because he lived a life without a mother going crazy and a father who stopped loving you one day and never found it in his heart to love you ever again.

Christopher had called F to tell him about his mother's passing, the only person he bothered to tell. His daily life was so far removed from F's and the world he had once known, so why bother saying much? Really, why? You lived, that was all, and one day Mother was gone and life went on as usual. You went to work each morning, scanned the news that was fit to clip for your company's clients, drank tea with your colleagues, who told you about their lives and complained about the Gini coefficient of Hong Kong where the rich pretended to be middle class in order not to suffer guilt at being so very, very privileged while the sea of poverty rose around them, an angry tide swelling into a tsunami. And then one day it was the 35th reunion that coincided with the 15th annual anniversary of the penultimate hand-over of your city's past, and you wondered if you should go and then here you were. Right here. Now. Watching regret invade F, perhaps even more than regret, shame over you, the inappropriate friend. Forcing out Mother, who stubbornly resisted oblivion. Indulging in but not savoring this divine meal. Divining Father, who forced you Lethe-wards, as if your very existence were his to deny. Dreading the day when F no longer responded to your calls or texts or emails. Unfriended you. Here you were. Right now. Waiting for the fall.

