American Higher Education

Abstract
Swee left for New York four weeks after the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts. 'So lucky, you!' Mary Chao said enviously. They had sat for the Senior exams together. But Mary, who had out-scored Swee in total A grades, was stuck in Malacca, looking at two more years of pre-college textbooks, lamenting her father's decision to send her to the university in Kuala Lumpur. She even forgot to make fun of Swee's college choice, New York Pepsodent College, although everyone else didn't. 'What for study in Pepsodent? You study for dental hygienist, ah?' Auntie May had asked. 'All life look into people's smelly mouth.'
SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

American Higher Education

Swee left for New York four weeks after the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts.

'So lucky, you!' Mary Choo said enviously. They had sat for the Senior exams together. But Mary, who had out-scored Swee in total A grades, was stuck in Malacca, looking at two more years of pre-college textbooks, lamenting her father’s decision to send her to the university in Kuala Lumpur. She even forgot to make fun of Swee’s college choice, New York Pepsodent College, although everyone else didn’t. 'What for study in Pepsodent? You study for dental hygienist, ah?' Auntie May had asked. 'All life look into people's smelly mouth.'

Mama had agreed to let Swee go far away although it was only the first year of Ah Kong’s death because Swee was waking up nights screaming. In her nightmares, Ah Kong pecked at her shoulders with horny claws. Awake, she felt his hard head rapping against her bones.

Ah Voon scolded furiously. 'All this because you didn’t drop tears at Ah Kong’s funeral. Now if you burn some joss at the altar, cry, and beg him to forgive you, your bad dreams will go away. But to leave your mother when she is still wearing black! What are daughters for?'

To appease Ah Kong’s spirit, Mama invited Abbott Narasimha from the White Elephant Buddhist Temple in Penang to chant the Lotus Sutra. According to the Temple’s dedication papers, he was the same world-famous monk who had preached at the Swe Dagon in Rangoon in 1956, and at the London Theosophical Institute in 1960. Mama paid for his first-class air ticket, and his accommodation at Tanjong Rhu Resort, the ice-cube palace a few miles away, built with Sultan Rehman’s money just two years ago in 1984, at the height of Japanese investment in Malacca. Tanjong Rhu lured Japanese tourists by advertising expensive French Hennessy brandy, Spanish-rolled cigars, and all-night karaoke.

Mama also presented the Abbott with a cheque (she wouldn’t tell the girls how much) in a bright red envelope delicately webbed with calligraphy that Peik had ink-brushed.

Swee and Yen laughed at Peik for encouraging Mama in her Buddhist adventure. Alone of the three sisters, Peik attended morning and evening services every Sunday at the Lorong Pinyin Methodist Church. But she was unabashed. 'Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." It’s too late for Ah Kong to make penance, but why stand in Mama’s
American Higher Education

way?'

It didn’t matter that Ah Kong had not been a Buddhist, Mama explained. The important thing was to get his ghost into Paradise, and to stop haunting them in the kitchen where his icy-brown corpse had lain all night with frozen irises fixed on the refrigerator’s interior light.

Abbott Narasimha led a team of monks into the house to chant the Lotus Sutra. Leaving their polished copper begging bowls in a heap by the kitchen door, shoulders and bony collar bones bare and brown like mahogany, they wrung chimes from prayer bells, and their saffron robes, coloured ripe persimmons, blew in the winds from the standing fans Ah Voon had set up to cool the room.

Swee and Yen couldn’t decide how old the men were. Their bald scalps didn’t give away their age. After the first morning Swee got to like their chanting. Together, their voices didn’t rattle as much as drone; not as peacefully as she had anticipated, but drilling a repetitious demand, the low and high tones sounding like giant bees humming for nectar.

Ecstatic, refusing help from the neighbours’ maids, Ah Voon prepared masses of vegetarian noodles stir-fried with astonishing varieties of beancurd. Dried, pressed, baked, fried, puffed, steamed, salted, spiced, seasoned, shaped into balls and squares, sticks, twigs, and ropes, they looked just like duck-breasts, beef-balls, air-dried meat, pork cutlets, chicken livers and gizzards. Swee couldn’t taste the difference between them, but the Abbott, the monks, and Mama’s visitors ate as much as Ah Voon served, all day a march of dishes circling the tables.

On the first day of the rituals, as they were watching her shape her tofu imitations, Ah Voon, no longer disapproving and sullen, burst out in voluble Hokkien, 'I never told your father I was a follower of the Abbess Tien Hin, who led the Ten Thousand Blossoms Women’s Association. In Amoy I cooked for a kong-si owned by the Hakka members of the Ten Thousand Blossoms. We swore to be faithful, never to marry or have children, never to eat meat. We were so happy together! But the kong-si ran out of money, and your father took me away from Amoy to serve your mother. All this was years before the three of you were born!' All day she commanded the care of the altar table while the monks, averting their eyes, chanted and rang the bells. Burning a bundle of joss-sticks every hour, she tended to the over-sized bowl of ash. She groomed the offerings of glowing tangerines and pyramids of globed pomelos and red-stamped wheat buns, and whisked at fungus, ordinary dust, stray hairs, and every encroaching sign of decay.

The combs of yellow bananas in front of Ah Kong’s blown-up photograph – taken when he was a young man, perhaps when he was still an up-and-coming timber tycoon in Sarawak, for it had the faint address of a studio in Kuching at the bottom – remained perfectly gold, with never a brown blotch
appearing through the three days it took to chant the whole of the Lotus Sutra.

Swee marvelled at how Ah Voon kept the fruit pristinely fresh, till she was allowed to eat them on Monday morning. Ah Voon had painted each banana with a clear coat of mineral wax. When Swee peeled a banana for breakfast, the wax cracked into white crumbs, and the flesh inside was unripe and bitter. She had to throw it out.

'Do you have to go?' Yen asked.

Swee was packing her black clothes for America, funerary costume which Mama had tailor-made for them to wear day and night for the three-year mourning period. Abbott Narasimha had instructed Mama - four women alone! he'd warned - to follow the strictest Confucianist observations on Ah Kong's death. Mama even had fresh pyjamas of black polished cotton sewn up for all of them.

Ah Kong had not shared with Mama the name of the Sarawakan he was matchmaking for Yen, so Yen's arranged marriage fell through with his death. On the other hand, as Swee pointed out to Mama, although Yen was almost twenty, now that she had her own fortune, she had all the time in the world to decide what to do with her life.

But Swee, not yet eighteen, was in a hurry to leave. When the bananas finally turned brown, she remembered Ah Kong's liver-spotted face. She dreamed of Ah Kong hovering, a pale vapour in front of the open refrigerator. In her dreams she saw his face back-lit by a mirror reflecting off her body, and smoke tumbling out of his wide-open livid eyes. His white hairs no longer floated in odd places in the house yet she felt the absence of his weekly visitant body in the rooms, rooms kept unnaturally clean, dusted, mopped, picked up, smelling of caustic soda, swept meticulously, by Ah Voon who moved from corner to corner, obliterating all signs of disintegration.

As soon as the visa came from the American embassy, Swee bought her air-ticket to New York. From Kennedy Airport, the travel agent cautioned her, she was to take a shuttle bus to another airport called Newark, then board a smaller plane to Albany, where a student would meet her to drive her to Pepsodent College.

'Promise me you wear all black until the three years are finish,' Mama insisted. 'If you put on any other colour, Ah Kor.g's ghost will be angry!'

Swee was happy to promise Mama that. She didn't need Ah Kong to follow her to America.

She was not the only one to worry about appeasing his spirit. Peik gave Pastor Fung $500 for the Sunlight Beneficent Old People's Charity in memory of Ah Kong. Their lawyer Mr. Chia had advised Peik to keep a separate bank account since she was a rich woman in her own right, and she
not seventeen years old! The cheque to Pastor Fung was the first one Peik had ever signed.

In many ways, Swee thought, despite being four years younger, Peik was more advanced than Yen. Yen didn’t want to leave Mama, and she didn’t want Swee to leave either. She had never grown those wings Swee wanted so badly to use.

‘Don’t go!’ she begged on Swee’s last night home, moaning without shame, mucus running down her nose like thickened tears. ‘Oh, oh, oh, oh, Swee’s leaving us, she’ll never come back!’

‘What bad luck!’ Mama muttered. ‘To say such a bad luck thing! Rubbish!’ Mama was losing her dulcet tones fast, now Ah Kong was gone.

Aloud, Mama consoled Yen. ‘Swee got a round-trip ticket, and she coming home same month next year, alright, Swec? Anyway, after you finish secretarial course, you can go visit her in America. Pastor Fung say Pepsodent College in beautiful and safe New York country part. Two of you can go look-see look-see all over America.’

Swee knew Yen would never go. Yen was terrified of flying. Gulls and pigeons have pea-sized brains, she said, that’s how they fly. But humans with their big brains can’t stay up.

Crying till she shook, with her wet eyes and damp red nose Yen reminded Swee of the puppy which, after only three weeks with them, had run out onto the main road and was struck by a Malacca-Kuala Lumpur taxi. It was a shivery thing, born under a scary star, and it never stopped shaking, even in their laps. Peik had proclaimed it a sick pup which should be put to sleep, but Yen hid it under her towels in her bedroom and Mama didn’t have the heart to wrench it away from her. Ah Voon had left the gate open the afternoon the puppy was run over, and Swee still wondered how, too timid even to venture out of Yen’s bedroom, it had escaped from the house.

Ah Voon refused to speak about Swee’s leaving. Whenever Mama raised it, she began to pick books, shoes, cushions, lint off the floor. Or she brought out the large straw broom and banged it around furniture, or squatted in the kitchen to clean the refrigerator’s bottom coils one more time.

When they were younger, Yen and Swee had made up stories that Ah Voon was Ah Kong’s secret lover in Fujian. Ah Voon had been devoted to turning out his virility dishes every Saturday – sweet lotus-seed-stuffed buns, she claimed, for fathering many children; bitter melon in rich pork soup for tranquil fornication; ginkgo nuts and tree-ear fungi fried with liver to enrich the blood before ejaculation; jellied pig-blood and ginger to heat his lust. Swee believed Ah Kong came home for Ah Voon’s cooking as much as for Mama’s obedience. His eyes turned milky with greed at the dining table, and he was forever complimenting Mama on managing to keep Ah Voon with the family.

Mama said that Ah Kong had first hired Ah Voon for her, even before the wedding, and she never asked what he paid Ah Voon each month. After the
funeral Yen and Swee waited for Ah Voon to quit.

The night before Swee left for New York, Ah Voon called the taxi company, ironed her underwear, packed them in the suitcase, baked a sooji cake for her to take on the plane, then padded around the kitchen as if nothing had changed. ‘You write to your Ah Mama,’ was all she said, ‘and don’t make her cry!’

Then Swee knew it was Mama whom Ah Voon had been devoted to for more than twenty years. She served Mama’s gliding voice, Mama’s dimpled smiles, Mama’s slow lazy body. All those virility dishes for Ah Kong were to bring Mama satisfaction. Ah Voon was never going to leave Mama.

Flying on the Pan-Am Boeing 707 was a relief. Swee liked the cold dry artificial air blowing out of vents, the mechanical voice of the pilot crackling with static, ‘We are now climbing 20,000 feet above sea-level’, the bodies packed in tight rows like robots. She liked being in the compact steel and plastic machine, different from the hot moist atmosphere of Malacca and Malaysians. She knew there could be no fungus, no green mould or brown spores fuzzing her seat, no passenger on board like Mama and Ah Voon demanding she showed proper feelings and thoughts.

The white hazy clouds outside the port window were like so much trailing smoke to her speed. Relieved, uncertain, guilty, sorry, worried, free, elated, suspended between Mama and New York, Swee wished she could remain between the two for a while longer.

But after three breakfasts, two dinners and one lunch, she was scrambling for her two suitcases at the Kennedy terminal, her new passport and student visa crammed down her jeans pocket so tight a pickpocket would have to peel her like a banana to get to them.

Albany was a disappointment. Pastor Fung hadn’t told her it would seem smaller than Malacca. In September at 5.30 p.m. the sky was already sickly-grey, and a cold wind whistled in her ears and through the industrial cinder-block airport buildings, empty runways blotched by oil-slicks, and parking lots with cars like museum behemoths and no people in them. Glass shards, soda cans, bottles, tall weedy strands resembling shredded ferns poked out of vacant lots, and rags and sheets of newsprint wrapped their presences around the buckled corners of pavements.

The Pepsodent student was waiting out on the curb for her. The van had graffiti written in ink on its seats. She read ‘Bulls charge!’ ‘Go, Bulls, go’, ‘Nice girls give’, ‘Oink’, and hesitated to sit on words.

‘C’mon,’ he said impatiently, tossing her bags in at the back.

Should she talk to him, confess it was her first day in America? ‘What day is it?’ she asked as he started the engine.

He looked at her in the rear-view mirror. ‘Friday.’ Then he added, ‘Don’t you people have clocks to tell the days?’

She didn’t say anything after that.
Swee had arrived ten days after the college semester began, too late for orientation, ice-breakers, rushes, class introductions, ice-cream socials, and welcome receptions. Americans worked fast, everything was speeded up in Pepsodent College. By the time she arrived, many of the students already had their courses signed for, boyfriends and girlfriends picked, sororities, fraternities, and social clubs fixed.

She had the smallest suite in the quad, the suite from which earlier roommates had migrated as they found other vacancies. It was the suite for absentee students, the freshman who fell ill with mononucleosis and had to put off college for a year, one whose father's business had unexpectedly failed and who couldn't make the fees, and another who found herself pregnant and had decided to get married.

She discovered all this weeks later, but for the first few nights she waited for her roommates to show up, live Americans who listened to the latest in pop music, and who would teach her how to dress like an American, which professors to study with, what to eat in the cafeteria. She was the strong second sister, Swee reminded herself. She didn't collapse like Yen when things didn't go her way.

All Friday she was alone. The suite had a shared bath area with three shower stalls and three toilets, but although she heard noises later at night she met no one.

On Saturday and Sunday she convinced the dining-hall checker she was a real student even without a meal card, but she didn't have enough courage to talk to anyone. She watched the students heap their trays full of food. As if playing a game, they piled plates on other plates, carefully balancing saucers and dishes of pies, chocolate cakes, ice-cream, and rice pudding on top of everything else.

She studied them as they ate. They were large freckled people who cut their Salisbury steak, which was only hamburger, in flamboyant gestures. They left the green beans that were strung with white fibres in piles on the sides of their trays. So sloppy! Yen would have yelled at them for the mess they made with their food.

They kept returning to the line to pick up more food, apple sauce, mashed potato and gravy, sweet potato sprinkled with marshmallows, chunks of iceberg lettuce and hard red tomatoes. Everything was sweet, including the salad dressing.

At first Swee thought they must be hungry, they put so much food on their trays. Then she noticed they threw away most of it. Even the pies with the lovely gold crusts oozing apple pieces and purple blueberry filling were only picked at, the crisped crusts thrown out.

Afraid she might be hungry later, she stole a dark red apple and put it in her coat pocket. The thought of the apple, hard and sugary, snuggled next to her hip, consoled her all day, so much so that she took an apple each morning from the dining hall.
But she was too heartsick to eat them. In a month she had a laundry basket full of starred-bottom red Delicious. Her stark little room, squashed with scratched Formica-covered built-in furniture, the desk drawers which had to be juggled closed and which had reeked of raw plywood and cockroaches, now wafted a heavy smell of apples, overbearingly sweet, like a grocery bin or like an orchard raining fantasy over-ripe fruit.

Alone at night, while she read in bed, she saw herself as a worm hidden in the heart of a giant apple. The fluorescent light jumped off the polished waxed apple skins, pooling the room with dark crimson spots. She needed the colour. Wearing all those black clothes that Mama made her pack was making her sad.

‘You remind me of the Hmong,’ Clarissa said. She was in Swee’s American history course and found they were sharing the same corridor. ‘All that black. Is it something to do with your culture?’

Swee said yes. She didn’t want to talk about Ah Kong.

‘You’re not Hmong, are you?’ Clarissa asked. The teacher was late as usual, and only six of them were in class on time. ‘Those people who are coming to America from the Cambodian highlands. You look just like them.’

‘What do they look like?’ Swee suspected she wasn’t going to like Clarissa’s answer.

‘Like you. My dad works with the Hmong in a refugee camp in Texas. They keep dying on him.’

‘What does he do, kill them?’

She thought she was making a joke but Clarissa stiffened.

‘You’re not very tactful, are you?’ she pouted. ‘My dad says they’re people from the Stone Age. They can’t tell the difference between reality and television, so these young men, when they watch Dracula or the Werewolf or some other horror show, they think these spooks are for real. My dad says they’re actually dying from fear! Imagine that!’

Professor Lopez came in then, and Swee didn’t have time to tell Clarissa she could imagine it.

Manuel Lopez. He was a Puerto Rican, Clarissa told Swee, the only Puerto Rican professor in the history of Pepsodent College. Clarissa said he was short, but he was taller than Swee. Swee liked his moustache, his glossy skin, the dark hair twisting in hundreds of tiny fastidious curls. Nervous, skinny, he lectured dancing on his feet, black polished leather dress shoes treading back and forth in the front of the room like the paws of a big cat.

‘I guess you can’t be Hmong,’ Clarissa decided, ‘you’re too Westernized. I see how you’ve been looking at Professor Lopez.’

By Christmas, although Swee was still sworn to wear black, she had thrown away the rotting apples and replaced them with coloured beach balls she had found for sale at Woolworth’s on a shopping trip to Albany.
The Woolworth's was an impressive limestone-faced building, an emporium of cheap jeans from the Philippines, 90-cent costume jewellery from Guatemala, and gummy chocolates in fancy rose-printed boxes from Brooklyn. In November, when all the Pepsodent students had left for Thanksgiving at home, the striped red and blue and yellow and white beach balls left over from a summer sale behind the toy racks reminded her of the Jalan Raya stalls at home. She bought ten of them. The salesclerk rang up the price without taking her eyes off her, acting like Swee was going to stick a gun in her face at any minute.

The balls took up almost all the spare space in her room, and sometimes she talked to one or the other of them, her missing roommates.

Just before Christmas, Pinny came to Swee’s room to introduce herself. Clarissa had pointed Hong out to Swee weeks ago in the dining hall, ‘Hong from Hong Kong,’ she said with a particular emphasis.

‘What do you mean?’ Swee stared at Pinny who was wearing tight ski pants and a yellow and lime green striped tee, like a Venus bumble-bee.

‘You know, easy lay.’

Swee was shocked by her language. Clarissa was a prim born-again Christian.

‘Harry told me she’s slept with everyone who’s asked her.’ Harry was Clarissa’s boyfriend whom she had just successfully invited to accept Christ into his life. Clarissa didn’t work so hard on Swee, she said, because she respected her different culture.

Swee didn’t ask her the obvious.

Pinny Hong, surrounded by a bunch of men, was laughing and sticking out her tongue at them. Her tongue looked seductive. She pushed out her chest, and her breasts under the tight yellow and green tee stuck out like her tongue, like yellow and green baby beach balls. Swee could hear her two tables over, her voice a kind of American G.I. accent with a heavy Chinese sing-song quality.

‘Don’t you spend time with her. She’s a jezebel, a whore!’ Clarissa got up violently and left the hall.

Swee watched as Pinny went off with the tallest of the men, her long hair rubbing on his chest as they walked out together.

Swee was surprised when Pinny knocked on her door, saying ‘I’m having a party tonight, it’s my twenty-first birthday, and I thought you may be free.’ Pinny didn’t give the beach balls a glance.

Of course Swee was free, she was always free. It was Professor Lopez she was waiting for, his head so full of dates and social ideals he didn’t notice her.

‘The American Revolution,’ he had said last week, ‘is still the most notable experiment in historical movements. That all men are created equal is the boldest of political philosophies, its consequences are still being worked out throughout the world.’

Swee thought of Ah Kong as she listened to Professor Lopez. She was
sure Ah Kong had never heard of the American Revolution. As his daughter she was still a Wing, and she knew Professor Lopez was talking to Ah Kong’s ghost through her. A black Hispanic Puerto Rican and a Malaysian-created equal. She had already signed up for his American Constitution seminar next semester, and was looking forward to working with him in a smaller group.

She went to the suite which Pinny shared with some other Hong Kong students. They were full-paying students like Swee, and they had expensive music equipment, a twenty-eight inch television, expensive kitchen equipment. Pinny was the only work-study student among them. Swee had seen her checking books in the library.

Although it was snowing hard outside, the suite was packed with sweating bodies. Everyone had brought a present for Pinny. She was unlocking her bedroom and throwing the packages inside. ‘Oooh,’ she squealed as the presents appeared, ‘nice of you! I ROVE presents.’ Drunk, she was dropping her ‘l’s. People were hauling six-packs of Budweiser, Canadian Ale, Michelob to the kitchen counters.

Swee recognized some of the students milling in the rooms. Most were vague faces she had glimpsed at lectures. In the middle of the living room someone lit a marijuana stick, and soon a circle of dopeheads was sitting on the wall-to-wall carpet sucking on joints and passing them around like communion wafers.

She saw Clarissa’s Harry come in with a package in fancy silver and purple wrapping. Couples were dancing to Bob Marley in the dark, weaving in between the sitting bodies, with only the light from the kitchen coming through as others opened and shut the kitchen door. No one was paying any attention but Swee, as Pinny took Harry’s present, unlocked her bedroom door, and disappeared inside the bedroom with Harry. She didn’t know when they came out because she saw Professor Lopez standing alone by the window watching the dopeheads.

When she went up to him, he gave a shrug. ‘I didn’t know there would be so many here, I have an asthma problem and can’t stay.’

‘I’ll leave with you,’ she offered.

‘Oh, no, this is a party for young people like you. You must stay!’

‘How about some Chinese food?’ She pointed to the table pushed against one wall where the food was laid out, platters of stringy noodles, bowls of soy-coloured rice, beef and mushy cabbage, and where the Chemistry and English professors were filling up their plates.

He waved at the air in front of him as if to get rid of pesky flies. ‘Too much smoke.’

She followed him out into the quad, into a sudden huge wintry silence. The reggae music throbbed rather than sounded out of the closed dorm windows. Snow was falling in big wet flakes. Shining incongruously, the moon radiated on the spinning flakes. Looking up she saw giant spooks of
cosmic wheels in the January sky. It was so cold her ears buzzed faintly, and she gulped large painful breaths. It was the wrong thing to do; her lungs ached immediately. She pushed her nose into the black muffler, glad for the black parka and its too-large hood, glad yet sorry Professor Lopez couldn’t see her face.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘you wrote a good paper.’
‘You know who I am?’
‘Swee Wing. “The Federalist papers and the 1960s civil rights movement in the South”.’
‘Actually, my name is Wing Swee Su, and my sisters call me Swee.’
‘Sweet Wing.’
She was flattered.
‘You write well for a freshman.’
‘I want to be a journalist.’
‘So young and already you know what you want.’ Professor Lopez’s bare head was spotted with melting flakes. ‘Shall I walk you back to your dorm?’

The path was dark, unmarked, slippery with crystallized snow layered over weeks of old tough ice. She had never bought boots and she slid every so often where the snow gave way under her sneakers. The wet was freezing her toes but she didn’t dare complain.

Professor Lopez reached out and gripped her hand to steady her. He was gloveless also. His palm, shockingly warm and huge, covered her pain­tingling hand like a deep pocket. She didn’t want him to let go.

The week after the birthday party, Pinny knocked on her door again. By this time Swee had thrown out the beach balls. Manuel had said they were childish, her sense of humour immature.

‘Thank you for the scarf,’ Pinny said.
Swee had brought her the pink-blue-gold-coloured scarf Clarissa had given her for an early Christmas present. Clarissa was trying to break her away from wearing black, and Swee couldn’t tell her that it wasn’t twelve months yet since Ah Kong had been laid underground. Of course, once Swee saw Harry at the party she was sorry she had also betrayed Clarissa.

‘I hear you write for the Daily Peps.’ Wrapped up in a stuffed goosedown jacket, Pinny managed to look as if she would peel out of it easily. Her shiny black hair, hanging lushly down to her waist, freshly laundered, was making its statement, ‘Look at her, look at her!’

Swee tried to block Pinny’s view of her room. Without the crimson apples and the yellow and green balls, she had set up a shrine to Manuel. The four books for his U.S. Constitution seminar were lined up on her desk and she had taped a photograph of him she had ripped off the college yearbook in the library to the wall.

‘I’m sorry, my room’s a mess,’ she mumbled.
‘Don’t worry. I just came by to say I hope you enjoyed my party.’ Pinny gave Swee a slanted look. ‘I give lots of parties. Lots of professors come to
them!'

'Sure,' Swee stuttered, 'I had a good time.'

'I'd invite you for the next party, but I don't know when I can have it. See, I have a couple of incompletes. One of them is English 3, you know, the long essay. But, you know, if you can help me write the paper, maybe we can have another party this Saturday?'

Pinny was very confident, looking past Swee's shoulder toward her desk. 'Lots of professors will be there!' She finished the paper for Pinny an hour before the party started, even though she knew Manuel wouldn't be there. He had promised her over the phone he would knock on her door Tuesday night when he was back from New York.

The first night of Pinny's birthday party, she didn't know what it was she couldn't believe. That Professor Lopez, whose words she had been hanging on to for the last three months, was actually kissing her. That she was letting a strange man do those horrible, wonderful things to her body. That she was letting herself be fucked by someone she had just met at a party. That Manuel's shoes were sitting neatly lined by her bedside and his prickly hairy dark legs were thrown over her thighs.

He said he couldn't believe it was the first time for Swee, that he hoped she wasn't disappointed, that his asthma was affecting his performance, that he was better when it was warmer.

She was afraid to hug him, afraid to take liberties with him. He was a black god come down for Christmas. He left, taking down the telephone number for the suite, saying he would call and see her during the break.

Manuel never came to another of Pinny's parties. In early February and March, he called three times altogether, and came to Swee's room twice. She called his office over a dozen times, but he was usually away. He had an apartment in New York, in the Bronx, and when there were no classes, he came up to Pepsodent only occasionally.

She went by his office often, found him in only once, and then they made love on the office floor.

'Manuel Lopez. Manuel Lopez,' she said his name over and over again silently and aloud at night in her room. 'Man, Man, Man, Man.' Was Lopez related to Lupus, to wolf? 'Man wolf man wolf man wolf.'

Manuel was nervous in her room. He wanted the door locked and the lights off so no one would know she was in.

'No one comes here. I'm in the room of lost room-mates,' she told him. 'I could lose my position,' he frowned, and checked the doorknob before unbuckling his belt.

'Why don't you try to find your community?' he asked her as he was leaving. 'Puerto Ricans are a communal people. In New York, I am a Puerto Rican activist. Here at Pepsodent I am only a token.'
In late March the snow began melting although the trees remained bare. Manuel had stopped welcoming her to his office. He did not keep office hours, did not answer her telephone messages, missed two seminars in a row, and scheduled quizzes, film showings and in-class exams for other days when he did not appear.

Slowly the mornings were filling with light, a solitary secret activity to which no one but Swee appeared to pay any attention. She could hear the slushy icy water flowing downhill behind her room, a constant underground gurgle, like the way she thought about Manuel constantly, sensations flowing down, down from her head to her nipples and overflowing those, lapping down through the hidden crevices, a warm despairing trickle where he had made her gush and cry only a little while ago.

She kept going to Pinny’s parties – the paper she wrote for her got Pinny a B for the course – but after Manuel all the professors she met there were stupendously ugly, grey, stiff, creaky, like old used books.

‘Harry say you are going to be a reporter.’ Pinny had sidled up to Swee’s seat in the library reading room.

‘A journalist.’

‘I read your story about Pepsodent being the snow campus. I like that a lot.’ Swee’s essay had won the annual freshman composition award, and the Daily Peps had carried it yesterday. She was suspicious about Pinny’s intentions. Did she want her to write another essay for her English class?

‘I wish you would tell my story,’ Pinny said.

‘Why should I? I make fun of everything when I write, why would I want to lose your friendship?’ Swee didn’t believe herself.

Pinny pouted. ‘But you are a reporter. I have such an interesting life. It should be written for everyone.’

Three months was a long enough time to make them intimate friends, Pinny said. Time had a different claim in America, and Swee didn’t want to reject that claim, wanting to try out everything American.

‘You wouldn’t like the story I’d write.’

‘Of course I would. It’s the story of my life, so how can I hate it?’

Swee thought Pinny extremely naive for all that she slept around. Still, she had to give her credit: Pinny was pulling bad grades, but her eyes on men and their pockets gave her the ability to like herself and to see the world on clear terms.

‘All my reports are about sad and crazy things.’

‘Well, this one won’t be. My life is sad,’ Pinny’s face softened in a glow of self-delight, ‘but it’s fascinating. Who would believe the things that have happened to me?’

Swee felt a story twitching, a little spirit digging in the hollow like the little woman digging in another hollow just below her neck between the two breasts, the one who hammered at her when she was about to do something stupid, like speak out of turn or call Manuel.
‘All right, I will.’ Perversity was burrowing in the space above her nose between the eyebrows. ‘What shall I call you in the report?’

‘I want you to use my name. After all, I’m proud of my story.’

‘All right, Hong Nga.’

‘No, that’s my Chinese name. Use my English name, Betty. That’s the problem, telling a story from Hong Kong, finding the right names.’ Pinny ignored the frowning student at the other end of the library table. ‘They’re all wrong, Chinese names. No one knows their meanings, making up translations like Peony Happiness or Cloud Pillars or Bright Peacekeeper or whatever meaning some old person told them but never knew for sure.

‘The American names are no better. Why do you call yourself Betty, when you don’t know who Betty Crocker is? Think of Cecilia whose mother can’t get the c’s right or the I, so what you hear is sheshe or zhezhe. American names are the worst. My sister Yen’s best friend was Elvis Tay Seng Leong, who wanted me to give him special tuition in the Romantic Poets so he could get an English subsidiary and enter the university. Then you know that Thai student, Cher, who wears white lacy three-quarter-length-sleeved blouses and attends the Baptist Bible group meetings?’

When Pinny laughed Swee felt an odd generosity. Maybe she did like Pinny after all.

‘Whatever can you have in common with Pinny?’ Clarissa, no longer attached to Harry, was full of summer plans. She was going to Texas to intern with her father at the refugee camp. ‘I don’t know why someone like Pinny doesn’t try to help her own community,’ she complained, sitting on Swee’s desk and kicking her feet against it. ‘It’s plain selfishness. And you’re a straight A student! What can you be getting out of being with her?’

Clarissa couldn’t know anything was better for Swee than sitting alone in her room, waiting for Manuel’s knock on the door.

Swee was beginning to like Pinny quite a bit, but after a few more visits when Pinny told Swee about her coming into Hong Kong under cover of night from a village in Goungxou, brought over by an old man who’d promised her a good job but delivered her to a small business family looking for a concubine for the oldest son, an opium addict they were worried would end up with syphilis if he continued picking up prostitutes in the Kowloon District, she stopped coming around. Pinny had been asked to leave Pepsodent, her roommates explained, because she hadn’t paid the tuition fees; Clarissa said Pinny had been expelled for blackmailing a chemistry professor who turned her in to the Dean.

Manuel knocked one last time in April, late at night after she had gone to bed. He wouldn’t let her turn on the lights. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I haven’t told you before. I’m married. My wife is Carmen Lopez.’

In the dark she could still make out his expression, stern, the same look he wore for giving out quizzes and grades.
When she didn’t reply, he asked impatiently, ‘Don’t you know who Carmen Lopez is?’
Swee couldn’t answer.
‘She’s director of the Women’s Health Institute in Washington, D.C. Everyone who is anyone knows her, her name was on the short list last year for a sub-Cabinet position working directly with the President of the United States.’ His dark face glimmered in the room, picking up electrical ions from the air.
‘I’m not black,’ he had corrected her once, disapprovingly, ‘I’m Puerto Rican. You should go out and learn more about America instead of hiding in a small hick college!’ His chest was a smooth shiny brown, smooth warm surfaces polished to two pink-brown nipples, his face bone-sharp chocolate-sweet, and his hair crinkled like the nub of a black fleece. In bed he smelled like fudge-buttery ice-cream, melting warm under her tongue.
‘I’m not seeing you again. It’s too dangerous.’
She couldn’t contradict him. She didn’t know Carmen Lopez, the woman who was his wife. She couldn’t imagine him married.
‘We own a house in the Bronx, a renovated brownstone. She’s fiery, like all Puerto Ricans. That’s how I like women. You are different, quiet, timid. So Asian.’
She lay silently under his weight. She knew she could tumble him off the bed if she wanted to.
‘She’d kill me if she found out.’ He moved his smooth muscular body rhythmically, then faster.
Climbing off, he made a sad gesture with his hands. ‘Please understand, you mustn’t call me anymore.’

She wondered what Carmen looked like. Fat? Tall? Shorter than herself? No, a Puerto Rican woman had to be taller. Prettier? Perhaps in bed she lay on top of him.
Later she tracked down a Bronx community newspaper, La Raza Unidas, in the library and found a photograph of Carmen in a month-old copy. She looked like an ordinary white business woman in a skirted suit, a little overweight, her curly hair hanging below her ears.
The caption read, ‘Director of Women’s Health Institute, Carmen Lopez, addresses PS 42 graduating class.’ The face was expressionless, nothing to be read into it.
But until Swee saw her face, grey-blank in newsprint, she could not stop thinking of her. Everyone knew her, Manuel said. He was afraid of her. She was fiery.
Instead of dwelling on Manuel’s soapy-smooth dark amber skin, Swee wondered about Carmen. Was she also glowing brown black like Manuel, all honey flesh? Did she know so much about the American constitution that the President of the United States wanted to give her a job? What was a Puerto Rican, and why did Manuel see her as unlike a Puerto Rican?
She was failing the course on the American Constitution. Professor Lopez came late and left early. She sat right in front of the class, hoping he would speak to her, but he didn't take any questions. He was so nervous he stopped dancing in front of the chalkboard. She hated to see him frightened. She called his office, but hung up when he answered, remembering his plea.

One Friday afternoon she called the history department. 'Allo,' she said carefully, speaking loudly into the mouthpiece the way she thought Carmen Lopez would speak, 'I must speak to Professor Manny Lopez in the Bronx. This is an urgent call from Washington, D.C., for his wife, who is director of the Women's Health Institute. Can you give me his Bronx telephone number?'

The secretary gave her two numbers, one for his Bronx Community Organization office — he was appointed director of the BCO last month, she said — and the second for their home. She took down the home number on a scratch pad, tore off the page, then rolled it like a cigarette and put it in her coin purse, where she could fish it out whenever she wanted to make the long-distance call.

On Tuesday, before the seminar, she stood by the bayberry bushes under Manuel's office windows, which were four stories up. The snow had almost all melted by now. In four weeks classes would be over, and Manuel would vanish into the exotic Bronx. She would not be able to feel his energy, like a black sun radiating above her, shedding dates and laws and famous American names in reams of magisterial knowledge, while a mere writing tool she chased after the flow, murmuring, wait, wait, slow down, how do you spell that name? repeat the title of that legislative act, even if his eyes would not look at her, even if he was smiling now at red-haired Kathy Pelan, his research assistant, whom everyone snickered at for spending hours in his office with him. During the seminar hour, Swee opened her coin purse and rolled the cigarette-address in a kind of ecstasy. She knew Kathy Pelan was not going to get what she wanted.

The late April afternoon was full of white threads of dandelion fluff, like fish smilt clouding the watery air. Standing under his windows, her feet trembled, struck by envy of Carmen Lopez. Carmen, who held Manuel in her power, straddling the United States Constitution all the way to the White House, where the President wanted her. Swee imagined Manuel with his keeper, the unseen figure from the island. Fiery, he had said, a word reminding her of volcanoes, their fire-red magma oozing out of hidden vents, over the high lips, blood-viscous, the ground shaking and rumbling, fissures breaking, breaking in open mouths.

Carmen would not have lain quietly under him, Swee knew. She would have shaken him, scratched him like a cat with a lizard, lifted him up on her thighs, bitten his tongue till it bled.

She looked up where the window panes reflected the low 4 p.m. sun. He never opened his windows, but even if she could have scaled the brick
walls, he would never see her staring in, the glassy insets darkly glittering,
too dirty to see into or out of.

A phone call was very much like the windows – opaquely separating two
bodies, placing them close enough to call out to each other.
The operator asked for a dollar and eighty cents for the first three minutes.
Swee’s fingers tumbled the coins carelessly into the pay box.
Someone answered even before the third ring, impatient, abrupt, impolite.
‘Yes, who is this?’
She thought of hanging up, but it was too much money to waste.
‘Carmen Lopez?’ She was whispering.
‘Yes, speaking.’
Swee could see her frowning, thinking, ‘It’s Manuel’s woman.’
‘I am a woman,’ she said.
‘I don’t take calls for the Women’s Health Institute in my home,’ the voice
said, cutting her off. ‘Call me tomorrow in my office.’
‘Wait,’ she wanted to cry, ‘I’m not that kind of woman. I want to know
who you are, why Manuel won’t see me because he is afraid of you, how
come you have power over him’
There was silence at the other end, someone waiting for her answer, a
faint irritated breathing.
‘I’m sorry,’ Swee whispered, ‘I won’t call again.’
‘No, I don’t mean that.’ It was a loud confident voice, the voice of a
television broadcaster, an administrator, a queen, someone who could shake
a man. ‘This is my home number, you understand. What do you want? Who are you?’
She hung up, and pushed the return lever, but the machine kept all her
coins.

Swee left Pepsodent College as soon as the final exams were over in mid-
May. She did not write the paper for the American Constitution seminar,
but when she received the transcripts in Malacca, Manuel had given her an
A for the course anyway.
It was the straight string of A’s that persuaded Mama that America had
been a good choice for her. ‘Yes, yes,’ Mama repeated when Swee
protested, ‘you must return college, only this time you take Yen to America
with you. What to do? the eldest must follow the second. Peik will stay here
with me, and your sister, you keep.’