The Piano Teacher

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Extract

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It started as an accident. The small Herend rabbit had fallen into Claire's handbag. It had been on the piano and she had been gathering up the sheet music at the end of the lesson when she knocked it off. It fell off the doily (a doily! On the Steinway!) and into her large leather bag. What had happened after that was perplexing, even to her. Locket had been staring down at the keyboard, and hadn't noticed. And then, Claire had just . . . left. It wasn't until she was downstairs and waiting for the bus that she grasped what she had done. And then it had been too late. She went home and buried the expensive porcelain figurine under her sweaters.

Claire and her husband had moved to Hong Kong nine months ago, transferred by the government, which had posted Martin in the Department of Water Services. Churchill had ended rationing and things were starting to return to normal when they had received news of the posting. She had never dreamed of leaving England before.

Martin was an engineer, overseeing the building of the Tai Lam Cheung reservoir, so that there wouldn't need to be so much rationing when the rains ebbed, as they did every several years. It was to hold four and a half billion gallons of water when full. Claire almost couldn't imagine such a number, but Martin said it was barely enough for the people of Hong Kong, and he was sure that

by the time they had finished, they'd have to build another. 'More work for me,' he said cheerfully. He was analysing the topography of the hills so that they could install catch-drains for when the rain came. The English government did so much for the colonies, Claire knew. They made their lives much better, but the locals rarely appreciated it. Her mother had warned her about the Chinese before she left – an unscrupulous, conniving people, who would surely try to take advantage of her innocence and goodwill.

Coming over, she had noticed it for days, the increasing wetness in the air, even more than usual. The sea breezes were stronger and the sun's rays more powerful when they broke through cloud. When the P&O *Canton* had finally pulled into Hong Kong harbour in August, she had really felt she was in the tropics, hair frizzing up in curls, face always slightly damp and oily, the constant moisture under her arms and behind her knees. When she had stepped out of her cabin, the heat had assailed her like a physical blow, until she managed to find shade and fan herself.

There had been seven stops along the month-long journey, but after a few grimy hours spent in Algiers and Port Said, Claire had decided to stay on board rather than encounter more frightening peoples and customs. She had never imagined such sights. In Algiers, she had seen a man kiss a donkey and she couldn't discern whether the high odour was coming from one or the other, and in Egypt the markets were the very definition of unhygienic – a fishmonger gutting a fish had licked the knife clean with his tongue.

She had enquired as to whether the ship's provisions were procured locally, at these markets, and the answer had been most unsatisfactory. An uncle had died from food poisoning in India, making her cautious. She kept to herself, and sustained herself mostly on the beef tea they dispensed in the late morning on the sun deck. The menus, which were distributed every day, were mundane: turnips,

potatoes, things that could be stored in the hold, with meat and salads the first few days after port. Martin promenaded on the deck every morning for exercise, and tried to get her to join him, to no avail. She preferred to sit in a deck-chair, wearing a large-brimmed hat and wrap herself in one of the ship's scratchy wool blankets, face shaded from the omnipresent sun.

There had been a scandal on the ship. A woman, going to meet her fiancé in Hong Kong, had spent one too many moonlit nights on the deck with another gentleman, and had disembarked in the Philippines with her new man, leaving only a letter for her intended. Liesl, the girlfriend to whom the woman had entrusted the letter, grew visibly more nervous as the date of arrival drew near. Men joked that she could take Sarah's place, but she wasn't having any of that. Liesl was a serious young woman, who was joining her sister and brother-in-law in Hong Kong, where she intended to educate Unfortunate Chinese Girls in Art: when she held forth about it, it was always with capital letters in Claire's mind.

Before disembarking, Claire separated out all of her thin cotton dresses and skirts; she could tell that was all she would be wearing for a while. They had arrived to a big party on the dock, with paper streamers and shouting vendors selling fresh fruit juice and soy-milk drinks and garish flower arrangements to the people waiting. Groups of revellers had already opened champagne and were toasting the arrival of their friends and family.

'We pop the corks as soon as we see the ship on the horizon,' a man explained to his girl, as he escorted her away. 'It's a big party. We've been here for hours.'

Claire watched Liesl go down the gangplank, looking very nervous, and then she disappeared into the throng. Claire and Martin went down next, treading on the soft, humid wood, luggage behind them, carried by two scantily clad young Chinese boys who had materialized out of nowhere.

Martin had an old schoolfriend, John, who worked at Dodwell's, one of the trading firms, and had promised to greet the ship. He came with two friends and offered the new arrivals freshly squeezed guava drinks. Claire pretended to sip hers as her mother had warned her about the cholera that was rampant in these parts. The men were bachelors and very pleasant. John, Nigel, Leslie. They explained they all lived together in a mess – there were many, known by their companies' names, Dodwell's Mess, Jardine's Mess, et cetera, and they assured Claire and Martin that Dodwell's threw the best parties around.

They accompanied them to the government-approved hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, where a Chinese man with a long queue, dirty white tunic and shockingly long fingernails showed them to their room. They made an arrangement to meet for tiffin the next day and the men departed, leaving Martin and Claire sitting on the bed, exhausted and staring at one another. They didn't know each other very well. They had been married barely four months.

She had accepted Martin's proposal to escape the dark interior of her house, her bitter mother railing against everything, getting worse, it seemed, with her advancing age, and an uninspiring job as a filing girl in an insurance company. Martin was older, in his forties, and had never had luck with women. The first time he had kissed her, she had had to stifle the urge to wipe her mouth. He was like a cow, slow and steady. And kind. She knew this. She was grateful for it.

She had not had many chances with men. Her parents stayed at home all the time, so she had as well. When she had started seeing Martin – he was the older brother of one of the girls at work – she had had dinner at restaurants, drunk a cocktail at a hotel bar, and seen other young women and men talking, laughing, with an assurance she could not fathom. They had opinions about politics; they had read books she had never heard of and seen foreign films and

talked about them with such confidence. She was enthralled and not a little intimidated. And then Martin had come to her, serious: his job was taking him to the Orient, and would she come with him? She was not so attracted to him, but who was she to be choosy? she thought, hearing the voice of her mother. She let him kiss her and nodded yes.

Claire had started to draw a bath in their hotel room when another knock on the door revealed a small Chinese woman, an amah, she was called, who started to unpack their suitcases until Martin shooed her away.

And that was how they had arrived in Hong Kong, which was like nothing Claire had imagined. Apart from the usual colonial haunts – all hush and genteel, potted palms and polished wood in whitewashed buildings – it was loud and crowded and dirty and bustling. The buildings were right next to each other and often had clothing hung out to dry on bamboo poles. There were garish vertical signs hung on every one, advertising massage parlours, pubs and hair salons. Someone had told her that opium dens still existed in back alleys. There was often refuse on the street, sometimes even human filth, and there was a pungent, peppery odour that was oddly clingy, attaching itself to your very skin until you went home for a good scrub.

There were all sorts of people. The local women carried their babies in a sort of back sling. Sikhs served as uniformed security guards – you saw them dozing off on wooden stools outside the banks, turbaned heads hanging heavily above their chests, rifles held loosely between their knees. The Indians had been brought over by the British, of course. Pakistanis ran carpet stores, Portuguese were doctors and Jews ran the dairy farms and other large businesses. There were British businessmen and American bankers, White Russian aristocrats and Peruvian entrepreneurs – all peculiarly

well-travelled and sophisticated – and, of course, there were the Chinese, quite different in Hong Kong from the ones in China, she was told.

To her surprise, she didn't detest Hong Kong, as her mother had told her she would – she found the streets busy and distracting, so very different from Croydon, and filled with people and shops and goods she had never seen before. She liked to sample the local bakery goods, the pineapple buns and yellow egg tarts, and sometimes wandered outside Central, where she would quickly find herself in unfamiliar surroundings, where she might be the only non-Chinese around. The fruit stalls were heaped with not only oranges and bananas, still luxuries in post-war England, but spiky, strange-looking fruits she came to try and like: starfruit, durian, lychee. She would buy a dollar's worth and be handed a small, waxy brown bag and she would eat the fruit slowly as she walked. There were small stalls made of crudely nailed wood and corrugated tin, which housed small speciality enterprises: this one sold chops, the stone stamps the Chinese used in place of signatures, this one made only keys, this one had a chair that was rented for half-days by a street dentist and a barber.

The locals ate on the street in tiny restaurants called *daipaidong*, and she had seen three workmen in dirty singlets and trousers crouched over a plate containing a whole fish, spitting out the bones at their feet. One had seen her watching them, and deliberately picked up the fish's eyeball with his chopsticks, raised it up to her, smiling, before he ate it.

Claire hadn't met many Chinese people before, but the ones she had seen in the big towns in England had been serving in restaurants or ironing clothes. There were many of those types in Hong Kong, of course, but what had been eye-opening was the sight of the affluent Chinese, the ones who seemed English in all but their skin colour. It had been quite something to see a Chinese step out of a Rolls-Royce, as she had one day when she was waiting on the steps

of the Gloucester Hotel, or in business suits, having lunch with British men who talked to them as if they were the same. She hadn't known that such a world existed. And then, with Locket, she was thrust into this world.

After a few months settling in, finding a flat and furnishing it, Claire had put the word out that she was looking for a job giving piano lessons, 'as a lark', was how she put it – something to fill the day, but the truth was, they could really use the extra money. She had played the piano most of her life and was primarily self-taught, but she didn't think it would matter. Amelia, an acquaintance she had met at a sewing circle, said she would ask around.

She rang a few days later.

'There's a Chinese family, the Chens. They run everything in town. Apparently, they're looking for a piano teacher for their daughter, and they'd prefer an Englishwoman. What do you think?'

'A Chinese family?' Claire said. 'I hadn't thought about that possibility. Aren't there any English families looking?'

'No,' Amelia said. 'Not that I've been able to ascertain.'

'I just don't know . . .' Claire demurred. 'Wouldn't it be odd?' She couldn't imagine teaching a Chinese girl. 'Does she speak English?'

'Probably better than you or me,' Amelia said impatiently. 'They're offering a very adequate fee.' She named a large sum.

'Well,' Claire said slowly, 'I suppose it couldn't do any harm to meet them.'

Victor and Melody Chen lived in the Mid-Levels, in an enormous white two-storey house on May Road. There was a driveway with potted plants lining the sides. Inside, there was the quiet, efficient buzz of a household staffed with plentiful servants. Claire had taken a bus and when she arrived, she was perspiring after the walk from the road to the house.

The amah led her to a sitting room, where she found a fan blowing blessedly cool air. A houseboy adjusted the drapes so that she was properly shaded. Her blue linen skirt, just delivered from the tailor, was wrinkled and she had on a white voile blouse that was splotched with moisture. She hoped the Chens would allow her some time to compose herself. She shifted, feeling a drop of perspiration trickle down her thigh.

No such luck. Mrs Chen swooped through the door, a vision in cool pink, holding a tray of drinks. A small, exquisite woman, with hair cut just so, so that it swung in precise, geometric movements. Her shoulders were fragile and exposed in her sleeveless shift, her face a tiny oval.

'Hello!' she trilled. 'Lovely to meet you. I'm Melody. Locket's just on her way.'

'Locket?' Claire said, uncertain.

'My daughter. She's just back from school and getting changed into something more comfortable. Isn't the heat dreadful?' She set down the tray, which held long glasses of iced tea. 'Have something cool, please.'

'Your English is remarkably good,' Claire said, as she took a glass.

'Oh, is it?' Melody said casually. 'Four years at Wellesley will do that for you, I suppose.'

'You were at university in America?' Claire asked. She hadn't known that Chinese went to university in America.

'Loved every minute,' she said. 'Except for the horrible, horrible food. Americans think a grilled cheese sandwich is a meal! And, as you know, we Chinese take food very seriously.'

'Is Locket going to be schooled in America?'

'We haven't decided but, really, I'd rather talk to you about your education,' Mrs Chen said.

'Oh.' Claire was taken aback.

'You know,' she continued pleasantly, 'where you studied music, and all that.'

Claire settled back in her seat. 'I was a serious student for a number of years. I studied with Mrs Eloise Pollock and was about to apply for a position at the Royal Academy when my family situation changed.'

Mrs Chen sat, waiting, head tilted, with one bird-like ankle crossed over the other, her knees slanted to one side.

'And so, I was unable to continue,' Claire said. Was she supposed to explain it in detail to this stranger? Her father had been let go from the printing company and it had been a black couple of months before he had found a new job as an insurance salesman. His pay had been erratic at best – he was not a natural salesman – and luxuries like piano lessons were unthinkable. Mrs Pollock, a very kind woman, had offered to continue her instruction at a much-reduced fee, but her mother, sensitive and pointlessly proud, had refused to even entertain the idea.

'And what level of studies did you achieve?'

'I was studying for my Seventh Grade examinations.'

'Locket is a beginning student but I want her to be taught seriously, by a serious musician,' Mrs Chen said. 'She should pass all her examinations with distinction.'

'Well, I'm certainly serious about music and, as for passing with distinction, that will be up to Locket,' Claire said. 'I did very well in my examinations.'

Locket entered the room, or rather, she bumbled into it. Where her mother was small and fine, Locket was chubby, all rounded limbs and padded cheeks. Her glossy hair was tied in a thick ponytail.

'Hallo,' she said. She had a distinctly English accent.

'Locket, this is Mrs Pendleton,' Mrs Chen said, stroking her daughter's cheek. 'She's come to see if she'll be your piano teacher so you must be very polite.'

'Do you like the piano, Locket?' Claire said, too slowly, she realized, for a ten-year-old child. She had no experience with children.

'I dunno,' Locket said. 'I suppose so.'

'Locket!' her mother cried. 'You said you wanted to learn. That's why we bought you the new Steinway.'

'Locket's a pretty name,' Claire said. 'How did you come about it?'

'Dunno,' said Locket again. She reached for a glass of iced tea and drank. A small trickle wended its way down her chin. Her mother took a napkin off the silver tray and dabbed it dry.

'Will Mr Chen be arriving soon?' Claire asked.

'Oh, Victor!' Mrs Chen laughed. 'He's far too busy for these household matters. He's always working.'

'I see,' Claire said. She was uncertain as to what came next.

'Would you play us something?' Mrs Chen asked. 'We just got the piano and it would be lovely to hear it played professionally.'

'Of course,' Claire said, because she didn't know what else to say. She felt as if she were being made to perform like a common entertainer – there had been something in the woman's tone – but she couldn't think of a gracious way to refuse.

She played a simple étude, which Mrs Chen seemed to enjoy and Locket squirmed through.

'I think this will be fine,' Mrs Chen said. 'Are you available on Thursdays?'

Claire hesitated. She didn't know whether she was going to take the job.

'It would have to be Thursdays because Locket has lessons the other days,' Mrs Chen said.

'Fine,' said Claire. 'I accept.'

Locket's mother was of a Hong Kong type. Claire saw women like her lunching at Chez Henri, laughing and gossiping with each other. They were called *taitais* and you could spot them at the smart

clothing boutiques, trying on the latest fashions or climbing into their chauffeur-driven cars. Sometimes Mrs Chen would come home and put a slim, perfumed hand on Locket's shoulder and comment liltingly on the music. And then, Claire couldn't help it, she really couldn't, she would think to herself, *You people drown your daughters*! Her mother had told her about how the Chinese were just a little above animals and that they would drown their daughters because they preferred sons. Once, Mrs Chen had mentioned a function at the Jockey Club that she and her husband were going to. She had been dressed up in diamonds, a flowing black dress and red, red lipstick. She had not looked like an animal.

Bruce Comstock, the head of the water office, had taken Martin and Claire to the club once, with his wife, and they had drunk pink gin while watching the horse races, the stands filled with shouting gamblers.

The week before the figurine fell into Claire's handbag, she had been leaving the lesson when Victor and Melody Chen came in. It had rung five on the ornate mahogany grandfather clock that had mother-of-pearl Chinese characters inlaid all down the front of it and she had been putting her things away when they walked into the room. They were a tiny couple and they looked like porcelain dolls, with their shiny skin and coal eyes. 'Out the door already?' Mr Chen said drily. He was dressed nattily in a navy-blue pinstriped suit with a burgundy handkerchief peeping out of his breast pocket just so. 'It's five on the dot!' He spoke English with the faintest hint of a Chinese accent.

Claire flushed. 'I was here early. Ten minutes before four, I believe,' she said. She took pride in her punctuality.

'Oh, don't be silly,' Mrs Chen said. 'Victor is just teasing you. Stop it!' She swatted her husband with her little hand.

'The English are so serious all the time,' he said.

'Well,' Claire said uncertainly. 'Locket and I spent a productive hour together.'

Locket slipped off the piano bench and under her father's arm. 'Hello, Daddy,' she said shyly. She looked younger than her ten years.

He patted her shoulder. 'How's my little Rachmaninoff?' he said. Locket giggled delightedly.

Mrs Chen was clattering around in her high heels. 'Mrs Pendleton,' she asked, 'would you like to join us for a drink?' She had on a suit that looked like it came out of the fashion magazines. It was almost certainly a Paris original. The jacket was made of a golden silk and buttoned smartly up the front and there was a shimmery yellow skirt underneath that flowed and draped like gossamer.

'Oh, no,' she answered. 'It's very kind of you, but I should go home and start supper.'

'I insist,' Mr Chen said. 'I must hear about my little genius.' His voice didn't allow for any disagreement. 'Run along now, Locket. The adults are having a conversation.'

There was a large velvet divan in the sitting room, and several chairs, upholstered in red silk, along with two matching black lacquered tables. Claire sat down in an armchair that was far more slippery than it looked. She sank too deeply into it, then had to move forward in an ungainly manner until she was perched precariously on the edge. She steadied herself with her arms.

'How are you finding Hong Kong?' Mr Chen said. His wife had gone into the kitchen to ask the amah to bring them drinks.

'Quite well,' she said. 'It's certainly different from England, but it's an adventure.' She smiled at him. He was a well-groomed man, in his well-pressed suit and red and black silk tie. Above him, there was an oil of a Chinese man dressed in robes and a black skull cap. 'What an interesting painting,' she remarked.

He looked up. 'Oh, that,' he said. 'That's Melody's grandfather, who had a large dye factory in Shanghai. He was quite famous.'

'Dyes?' she said. 'How fascinating.'

'Yes, and her father started the First Bank of Shanghai, and did very well indeed.' He smiled. 'Melody comes from a family of entrepreneurs. Her family was all educated in the West, England and America.'

Mrs Chen came back into the room. She had taken off her jacket to reveal a pearly blouse underneath. 'Claire,' she said. 'What will you have?'

'Just soda water for me, please.'

'And I'll have a sherry,' Mr Chen said.

'I know!' Mrs Chen said. She left again.

'And your husband,' he said. 'He's at a bank?'

'He's at the Department of Water Services,' she said. 'Working on the new reservoir.' She paused. 'He's heading it up.'

'Oh, very good,' Mr Chen said carelessly. 'Water's certainly important. And the English do a fair job of making sure it's in the taps when we need it.' He sat back and crossed one leg over the other. 'I miss England,' he said suddenly.

'Oh, did you spend time there?' Claire asked politely.

'I was at Oxford – Balliol,' he said, flapping his tie at her. Claire felt as if he had been waiting to tell her this fact. 'And Melody went to Wellesley, so we're a product of two different systems. I defend England, and Melody just loves the United States.'

'Indeed,' Claire murmured.

Mrs Chen came back into the room and sat down next to her husband. The amah appeared next and offered Claire a napkin. It had blue cornflowers on it.

'These are lovely,' she said, inspecting the embroidered linen.

'They're from Ireland,' Mrs Chen said. 'I just got them!'

'I just bought some lovely Chinese tablecloths at the China Emporium,' Claire said. 'Beautiful lace cut work.'

'You can't compare them with the Irish ones, though,' Mrs Chen said. 'Very crude.'

Mr Chen viewed his wife with amusement. 'Women!' he said to Claire.

The amah brought in a tray of drinks.

Claire sipped at her drink and felt the gassy bubbles in her mouth. Mr Chen looked at her expectantly.

'The Communists are a great threat,' she said. This is what she had heard again and again at gatherings.

Mr Chen laughed. 'Of course! And what will you and Melody do about them?'

'Shut up, darling. Don't tease,' said his wife. She took a sip of her drink. Mr Chen was watching her. 'What's that you're drinking, love?'

'A little cocktail,' she said. 'I've had a long day.' She sounded defensive.

There was a pause.

'Locket is a good student,' Claire said, 'but she needs to practise more.'

'It's not her fault,' Mrs Chen said breezily. 'I'm not here to oversee her practice enough.'

Mr Chen laughed. 'Oh, she'll be fine,' he said. 'I'm sure she knows what she's doing.'

Claire nodded. Parents were all the same. When she had children, she would be sure not to indulge them. She set her drink down. 'I should be going,' she said. 'It's harder to get a seat on the bus after five.'

'Are you sure?' Mrs Chen said. 'Pai was getting us some biscuits.'

'Oh, no, thank you,' she demurred. 'I really should be leaving.'

'We'll have Truesdale drive you home,' Mr Chen offered.

'Oh, no,' Claire said. 'I couldn't put you out.'

'Do you know him?' Mr Chen asked. 'He's English.'

'I haven't had the pleasure,' Claire said.

'Hong Kong is very small,' Mr Chen said. 'It's tiresome that way.'

'It's no trouble at all for Truesdale,' Mrs Chen said. 'He'll be going home anyway. Where do you live?'

'Happy Valley,' answered Claire, feeling put on the spot.

'Oh, that's near where he lives!' Mrs Chen cried, delighted at the coincidence. 'So, it's settled.' She called for Pai in Cantonese and told her to call the driver.

'Chinese is such an intriguing language,' Claire said. 'I hope to pick some up during our time here.'

Mr Chen raised an eyebrow. '*Cantonese*,' he said, 'is very difficult. There are some nine different tones for one sound. It's much more difficult than English. I picked up rudimentary English in a year, but I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to learn Cantonese or Mandarin or Shanghainese in twice that.'

'Well,' she said brightly, 'one always hopes.'

Pai walked in and spoke. Mrs Chen nodded. 'I'm terribly sorry,' she said, 'but the driver seems to have left already.'

'I'll catch the bus,' Claire said.

Mr Chen stood up as she picked up her bag. 'It was very nice to meet you,' he said.

'And you,' she said, and walked out, feeling their eyes on her back.

When she got home, Martin was already there. 'Hello,' he said. 'You're late today.' He was in a vest and his weekend trousers, which were stained and shiny at the knees. He had a drink in his hand.

She took off her jacket and put on a pot of water to boil. 'I was at the Chens' house today,' she said. 'Locket's parents asked me to stay for a drink.'

'Victor Chen, is it?' he asked, impressed. 'He's rather a big deal here.'

'I gathered,' she said. 'He was quite something. Not at all like a Chinaman.'

'You shouldn't use that word, Claire,' Martin said. 'It's very old-fashioned and a bit insulting.'

Claire coloured. 'I've just never . . .' She trailed off. 'I've never seen Chinese people like the Chens.'

'You are in Hong Kong,' Martin said, not unkindly. 'There are all types of Chinese.'

'Where is the amah?' she asked, wanting to change the subject.

Yu Ling came from the back when Claire called. 'Can you help with dinner?' Claire said. 'I bought some meat at the market.'

Yu Ling looked at her impassively. She had a way of making Claire feel uncomfortable, but she couldn't bring herself to sack her. She wondered how the other wives did it – they appeared to handle their servants with an easy aplomb that seemed unfamiliar and unattainable to Claire. Some even joked with them and treated them like family members, but she'd heard that was more the American influence. Her friend Cecilia had her amah brush her hair for her before she went to bed, while she sat at her dressing-table and put on cold cream.

Claire handed Yu Ling the meat she had bought on the way home. Then she went to lie down on the bed with a cold compress over her eyes. How had she got here, to this small flat on the other side of the world? She remembered her quiet childhood in Croydon, an only child sitting at her mother's side while she mended clothes, listening to her talk. Her mother had been bitter at what life had given her, a hand-to-mouth existence, especially after the war, and her father drank too much, perhaps because of it. Claire had never imagined life being much more than that. But marrying Martin had changed it all.

But this was the thing: she herself had changed in Hong Kong. Something about the tropical climate had ripened her appearance,

brought everything into harmony. Where the other English women looked as if they were about to wilt in the heat, she thrived, like a hothouse flower. Her hair had lightened in the tropical sun until it was veritably gold. She perspired lightly so that her skin looked dewy, not drenched. She had lost weight so that her body was compact, and her eyes sparkled, cornflower blue. Martin had remarked on it, how the heat seemed to suit her. When she was at the Gripps or at a dinner party, she saw that men looked at her longer than necessary, came over to talk to her, let their hands linger on her back. She was learning how to speak to people at parties, order in a restaurant with confidence. She felt as if she were finally becoming a woman, not the girl she had been when she had left England. She felt as if she were a woman coming into her own.

And then the next week, after Locket's lesson, the porcelain rabbit had fallen into her handbag.

The week after, the phone rang and Locket leaped up to answer it, eager for any excuse to stop mangling the prelude she had been playing, and while she had been chattering away to a schoolmate, Claire saw a silk scarf lying on a chair. It was a beautiful, printed scarf, the kind women tied around their necks. She put it into her bag. A wonderful sense of calm came over her. And when Locket returned, with only a mumbled, 'Sorry, Mrs Pendleton,' Claire smiled instead of giving the little girl a piece of her mind.

When she got home, she went into the bedroom, locked the door and pulled out the scarf. It was an Hermès scarf, from Paris, and had pictures of zebras and lions in vivid oranges and browns. She practised tying it around her neck, and over her head, like an adventurous heiress on safari. She felt very glamorous.

The next month, after a conversation in which Mrs Chen told her she sent all her fine washing to Singapore because 'the girls here don't know how to do it properly and, of course, that means I have

to have triple the amount of linens, what a bother', Claire found herself walking out with two of those wonderful Irish napkins in her skirt pocket. She had Yu Ling handwash and iron them so that she and Martin could use them with dinner.

She pocketed three French cloisonné turtles after Locket had abruptly gone to the bathroom – as if the child couldn't take care of nature's business before Claire arrived! A pair of sterling silver salt and pepper shakers found their way into her bag as she was passing through the dining room, and an exquisite Murano perfume bottle left out in the sitting room, as if Melody Chen had dashed some scent on as she was breezing her way through the foyer on her way to a gala event, was discreetly tucked into Claire's skirt pocket.

Another afternoon she was leaving when she heard Victor Chen in his study. He was talking loudly into the telephone and had left his door slightly ajar.

'It's the bloody British,' he said, before lapsing into Cantonese. Then, 'Can't let them,' and then something incomprehensible, which sounded very much like swearing. 'They want to create unrest, digging up skeletons that should be left buried, and all for their own purposes. The Crown Collection didn't belong to them in the first place. It's all our history, our artefacts, that they just took for their own. How'd they have liked it if Chinese explorers had come to their country years ago and made off with all their treasures? It's outrageous. Downing Street's behind all of this, I can assure you. There's no need for this right now.' He was very agitated, and Claire found herself waiting outside, breath held, to see if she couldn't hear anything more. She stood there until Pai appeared and looked at her questioningly. She pretended she had been studying the painting in the hallway, but she could feel Pai's eyes on her as she walked towards the door. She let herself out and went home.

Two weeks later, when Claire went for her lesson, she found Pai gone and a new girl opening the door.

'This is Su Mei,' Locket told her when they entered the room. 'She's from China, from a farm. She just arrived. Do you want something to drink?'

The new girl was small and dark, and would have been pretty if it hadn't been for a large black birthmark on her right cheek. She never looked up from the floor.

'Her family didn't want her because the mark on her face would make her hard to marry off. It's supposedly very bad luck.'

'Did your mother tell you that?' Claire asked.

'Yes,' Locket said. She hesitated. 'Well, I heard her say it on the telephone, and she said she got her very cheap because of it. Su Mei doesn't know anything! She tried to go to the bathroom in the bushes outside and Ah Wing beat her and told her she was like an animal. She's never used a tap before or had running water!'

'I'd like a bitter lemon, please,' Claire said, wanting to change the subject.

Locket spoke to the girl quickly. She left the room silently.

'Pai was stealing from us,' Locket said, eyes wide with the scandal. 'So Mummy had to let her go. Pai cried and cried, and then she beat the floor with her fists. Mummy said she was hysterical and slapped her face to stop her crying. They had to get Mr Wong to carry Pai out. He put her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and she was hitting his back with her fists.'

'Oh!' Claire said, before she could stifle the cry.

Locket looked at her curiously. 'Mummy says all servants steal.'

'Does she now?' Claire said. 'How terrible. But you know, Locket, I'm not sure that's true.' She remembered the way Pai had looked at her when she came upon her in the hallway and her chest felt tight.

'Where did she go?' she asked Locket.

'No idea,' she said cheerfully. 'Good riddance I say.'

Claire looked at the placid face of the girl, unruffled by conscience.

'There must be shelters or places for people like her.' Claire's voice quivered. 'She's not on the street, is she? Does she have family in Hong Kong?'

'Haven't a clue.'

'How can you not know? She lived with you!'

'She was a maid, Mrs Pendleton.' Locket looked at her curiously. 'Do you know anything about your servants?'

Claire was shamed into silence. The blood rose in her cheeks. 'Well,' she said. 'I suppose that's enough of that. Did you practise the scales?'

Locket pounded on the piano keys as Claire looked hard at the girl's chubby fingers, trying not to blink so that the tears would not fall.