from

The Piano Teacher

by

Janice Y. K. Lee

“A rare and exquisite story... Transports you out of time, out of place, into a world you can feel on your very skin.”
—Elizabeth Gilbert, author of Eat, Pray, Love

In the sweeping tradition of The English Patient, Janice Y. K. Lee’s debut novel is a tale of love and betrayal set in war-torn Hong Kong. In 1942, Englishman Will Truesdale falls headlong into a passionate relationship with Trudy Liang, a beautiful Eurasian socialite. But their affair is soon threatened by the invasion of the Japanese as World War II overwhelms their part of the world.

Ten years later, Claire Pendleton comes to Hong Kong to work as a piano teacher and also begins a fateful affair. As the threads of this spellbinding novel intertwine, impossible choices emerge—between love and safety, courage and survival, the present, and above all, the past.
June 1941

It begins like that. Her lilting laugh at a consular party. A spilled drink. A wet dress and a handkerchief hastily proffered. She is a sleek greyhound among the others—plump, braying women of a certain class. He doesn’t want to meet her—he is suspicious of her kind, all chiffon and champagne, nothing underneath, but she has knocked his glass down her silk shift (“There I go again,” she says. “I’m the clumsiest person in all Hong Kong”) and then commandeers him to escort her to the bathroom where she daubs at herself while peppering him with questions.

She is famous, born of a well-known couple, the mother a Portuguese beauty, the father a Shanghai millionaire with fortunes in trading and money lending.

“Finally, someone new! We can tell right away, you know. I’ve been stuck with those old bags for ages. We’re very good at sniffing out new blood since the community is so wretchedly small and we’re all so dreadfully sick of each other. We practically wait at the docks to drag the new people off the ships. Just arrived, yes? Have a job yet?” she asks, having sat him on the edge of the tub while she reapplies her lipstick. “Is it for fun or funds?”

“I’m at Asiatic Petrol,” he says, wary of being cast as the amusing newcomer. “And it’s most certainly for funds.” Although that’s not the truth. A mother with money.

“How delightful!” she says. “I’m so sick of meeting all these stuffy people. They don’t have the slightest knowledge or ambition.”

“Those without expectations have been known to lack both of those qualities,” he says.

“Aren’t you a grumpy grump?” she says. “But stupidity is much
more forgivable in the poor, don’t you think?” She pauses, as if to let him think about that. “Your name? And how do you know the Trotters?”

“I’m Will Truesdale, and I play cricket with Hugh. He knows some of my family, through my mother’s side,” he says. “I’m new to Hong Kong and he’s been very decent to me.”

“Hmmm,” she says. “I’ve known Hugh for a decade and I’ve never ever thought of him as decent. And do you like Hong Kong?”

“It’ll do for now,” he says. “I came off the ship, decided to stay, rustled up something to do in the meantime. Seems pleasant enough here.”

“An adventurer, how fascinating,” she says, without the slightest bit of interest. Then she finishes up her ablutions, snaps her evening bag shut, and, firmly taking him by the wrist, waltzes—there is no other verb; music seems to accompany her—out of the powder room.

Conscious of being steered around the room like a pet poodle, her momentary diversion, he excuses himself to go smoke in the garden. But peace is not to be his. She finds him out there, has him light her cigarette, and leans confidentially toward him.

“Tell me,” she says. “Why do your women get so fat after marriage? If I were an Englishman I’d be quite put out when the comely young lass I proposed to exploded after a few months of marriage or after popping out a child. You know what I’m talking about?” She blows smoke up to the dark sky.

“Not at all,” he says, amused despite himself.

“I’m not as flighty as you think,” she says. “I do like you so very much. I’ll ring you tomorrow, and we’ll make a plan.” And then she is gone, wafting smoke and glamour as she trips her way into the resolutely nonsmoking house of their hosts—Hugh loathes the smell. He sees her in the next hour, flitting from group to group, chattering away. The women are dimmed by her, the men bedazzled.

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The phone rings at his office the next day. He had been telling Simonds about the party.

“She’s Eurasian, is she?” Simonds says. “Watch out there. It’s not as bad as dating a Chinese, but the higher-ups don’t like it if you fraternize too much with the locals.”

“That is an outrageous statement,” Will says. He had liked Simonds up to that point.

“You know how it is,” Simonds says. “At Hong Kong Bank, you get asked to leave if you marry a Chinese. But this girl sounds different, she sounds rather more than a local girl. It’s not like she’s running a noodle shop.”

“Yes, she is different,” he says. “Not that it matters,” he adds as he answers the phone. “I’m not marrying her.”

“Darling, it’s Trudy Liang,” she says. “Who aren’t you marrying?”

“Nobody.” He laughs.

“That would have been quick work.”

“Even for you?”

“Wasn’t it shocking how many women there were at the party yesterday?” she says, ignoring him. The women in the colony are supposed to be gone, evacuated to safer areas, while the war is simmering, threatening to boil over into their small corner of the world.

“I’m essential, you know. I’m a nurse with the Auxiliary Nursing Service!” The only way women had been allowed to stay was to sign up as an essential occupation.

“None of the nurses I’ve ever had looked like you,” he says.

“If you were injured, you wouldn’t want me as a nurse, believe me.” She pauses. “Listen, I’ll be at the races at the Wongs’ box this afternoon. Do you care to join us?”

“The Wongs?” he asks.

“Yes, they’re my godparents,” she says impatiently. “Are you coming or not?”

“All right,” he says. This is the first in a long line of acquiescences.
Will muddles his way through the club and into the upper tier, where the boxes are filled with chattering people in jackets and silky dresses. He comes through the door of number 28 and Trudy spies him right away, pounces on him, and introduces him to everybody. There are Chinese from Peru, Polish by way of Tokyo, a Frenchman married to Russian royalty. English is spoken.

Trudy pulls him to one side.

“Oh, dear,” she says. “You’re just as handsome as I remember. I think I might be in trouble. You’ve never had any issues with women, I’m sure. Or perhaps you’ve had too many.” She pauses and takes a theatrical breath. “I’ll give you the lay of the land here. That’s my cousin, Dommie.” She points out an elegant, slim Chinese man with a gold pocket watch in his hand. “He’s my best friend and very protective, so you better watch out. And avoid her, by any means,” she says, pointing to a slight European woman with spectacles. “Awful. She’s just spent twenty minutes telling me the most extraordinary and yet incredibly boring story about barking deer on Lamma Island.”

“Really?” he says, looking at her oval face, her large golden-green eyes.

“And he,” she says, pointing to an owlish Englishman, “is a bore. Some sort of art historian, keeps talking about the Crown Collection, which is apparently something most colonies have. They either acquire it locally or have pieces shipped from England for the public buildings—important paintings and statues and things like that. Hong Kong’s is very impressive, apparently, and he’s very worried about what will happen once the war breaks loose.” She makes a face. “Also a bigot.”

She searches the room for others and her eyes narrow.

“There’s my other cousin, or cousin by marriage.” She points out a stocky Chinese man in a double-breasted suit. “Victor Chen. He thinks he’s very important indeed. But I just find him tedious. He’s
married to my cousin, Melody, who used to be nice until she met him.” She pauses. “Now she’s…” Her voice trails off.

“Well, here you are,” she says, “and what a gossip I’m being,” and drags him to the front where she has claimed the two best seats. They watch the races. She wins a thousand dollars and shrieks with pleasure. She insists on giving it all away, to the waiters, to the bathroom attendants, to a little girl they pass on the way out. “Really,” she says disapprovingly, “this is no place for children, don’t you think?” Later she tells him she practically grew up at the track.

Her real name is Prudence. “Trudy” came later, when it became apparent that her given name was wholly unsuitable for the little sprite who terrorized her amahs and charmed all the waiters into bringing her forbidden fizzy drinks and sugar cubes.

“You can call me Prudence, though,” she says. Her long arms are draped around his shoulders and her jasmine scent is overwhelming him.

“I think I won’t,” he says.

“I’m terribly strong,” she whispers. “I hope I don’t destroy you.”

He laughs.

“Don’t worry about that,” he says. But later, he wonders.

They spend most weekends at her father’s large house in Shek O, where wizened servants bring them buckets of ice and lemonade, which they mix with Plymouth gin, and plates of salty shrimp crackers. Trudy lies in the sun wearing an enormous floppy hat, saying she thinks tans are vulgar, no matter what that Coco Chanel says.

“But I do so enjoy the feel of the sun on me,” she says, reaching for a kiss.

The Liangs’ house is spread out on a promontory where it overlooks a placid sea. They keep chickens for fresh eggs—the hen house far away, of course, because of the odor—and a slightly fraying but still belligerent peacock roams the ground, asserting himself to any
intruders, except the groundskeeper’s Great Dane, with whom it has a mutual treaty. Trudy’s father is never there; mostly he is in Macau, where he is said to have the largest house on the Praia Grande and a Chinese mistress. Why he doesn’t marry her, nobody knows. Trudy’s mother disappeared when she was eight—a famous case that is still unsolved. The last anyone had seen of her she had been spotted stepping into a car outside the Gloucester Hotel. This is what he likes most about Trudy. Having so many questions in her life, she never asks questions about his.

Trudy has a body like a child—all slim hips and tiny feet. She is as flat as a board, her breasts not even buds. Her arms are as slender as her wrists, her hair a sleek-smoky brown, her eyes wide and Western, with the lid-fold. She wears form-fitting sheaths, sometimes the qipao, slim tunics, narrow pants, always flat silk slippers. She wears gold or brown lipstick, wears her hair shoulder-length, straight, and has black, kohl-lined eyes. She looks nothing like any of the other women at events—with their blowsy, flowing floral skirts, carefully permanent-waved hair, red lipstick. She hates compliments—when people tell her she’s beautiful, she says instantly, “But I have a mustache!” And she does, a faint golden one you can see only in the sun. She is always in the papers, although, she explains, it’s more because of her father than that she is beautiful. “Hong Kong is very practical that way,” she says. “Wealth can make a woman beautiful.” She is often the only Chinese at a party, although she says she’s not really Chinese—she’s not really anything, she says. She’s everything, invited everywhere. Cercle Sportif Français, the American Country Club, the Deutscher Garten Club, she is welcome, an honorary member to everything.

Her best friend is her second cousin, Dommie, Dominick Wong, the man from the races. They meet every Sunday night for dinner at the Gripps and gossip over what has transpired at the parties over
the weekend. They grew up together. Her father and his mother are cousins. Will is starting to see that everyone in Hong Kong is related in one way or another, everyone who matters, that is. Victor Chen, Trudy’s other cousin, is always in the papers for his business dealings, or he and his wife, Melody, are smiling out from photographs in the society pages.

Dominick is a fine-chiseled boy-man, a bit effeminate, with a long string of lissome, dissatisfied girlfriends. Will is never invited to Trudy’s dinners with Dommie. “Don’t be cross. You wouldn’t have fun,” she says, trailing a cool finger over his cheek. “We chatter away in Shanghainese and it would be so tedious to have to explain everything to you. And Dommie’s just about a girl anyways.”

“I don’t want to go,” he says, trying to keep his dignity. “Of course you don’t, darling,” she laughs. She pulls him close. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

“What?” Her jasmine smell brings to mind that waxy yellow flower, her skin as smooth, as impermeable.

“Dommie was born with eleven fingers. Six on the left hand. His family had it removed when he was a baby, but it keeps growing back! Isn’t that the most extraordinary thing? I tell him it’s the devil inside. You can keep pruning it, but it’ll always come back.” She whispers. “Don’t tell a soul. You’re the first person I’ve ever told! And Dominick would have my head if he knew! He’s quite ashamed of it!”

Hong Kong is a small village. At the RAF ball, Dr. Richards was found in the linen room of the Gloucester with a chambermaid; at the Sewells’ dinner party, Blanca Morehouse had too much to drink and started to take off her blouse—you know about her past, don’t you? Trudy, his very opinionated and biased guide to society, finds the English stuffy, the Americans tiresomely earnest, the French boring and self-satisfied, the Japanese quirky. He wonders aloud how she can stand him. “Well, you’re a bit of a mongrel,” she says. “You don’t belong anywhere, just like me.” He had arrived in Hong
Kong with just a letter of introduction to an old family friend, and has found himself defined, before he did anything to define himself, by a chance meeting with a woman who asks nothing of him except to be with her.

People talk about Trudy all the time—she is always scandalizing someone or other. They talk about her in front of him, to him, as if daring him to say something. He never gives them anything about her. She came down from Shanghai, where she spent her early twenties in Noel Coward’s old suite at the Cathay, and threw lavish parties on the roof terrace. She is rumored to have fled an affair there, an affair with a top gangster who became obsessed with her, rumored to have spent far too much time in the casinos, rumored to have friends who are singsong girls, rumored to have sold herself for a night to amuse herself, rumored to be an opium addict. She is a Lesbian. She is a Radical. She assures him that almost none of these rumors is true. She says Shanghai is the place to be, that Hong Kong is dreadfully suburban. She speaks fluent Shanghainese, Cantonese, Mandarin, English, conversational French, and a smattering of Portuguese. In Shanghai, she says, the day starts at four in the afternoon with tea, then drinks at the Cathay or someone’s party, then dinner of hairy crab and rice wine if you’re inclined to the local, then more drinks and dancing, and you go and go, the night is so long, until it’s time for breakfast—eggs and fried tomatoes at the Del Monte. Then you sleep until three, have noodles in broth for the hangover, and get dressed for another go around. So fun. She’s going to go back one of these days, she says, as soon as her father will let her.

The Biddles hire a cabana at the Lido in Repulse Bay and invite them for a day at the beach. There, they all smoke like mad and drink gimlets while Angeline complains about her life. Angeline Biddle is an old friend of Trudy’s, a small and physically unappealing Chi-
nese woman whom she’s known since they were at primary school together. She married a very clever British businessman whom she rules with an iron fist, and they have a son away at school. They live in grand style on the Peak, where Angeline’s presence causes some discomfort as Chinese are supposed to have permission to live there, except for one family who is so unfathomably rich they are exempt from the rules. There is a feeling, Trudy explains to Will later, that Angeline has somehow got one over on the British who live there, and she is resented for it, although Trudy admits that Angeline is hardly the most likable of people to begin with. In the sun, Trudy takes off her top and sunbathes, her small breasts glowing pale in contrast to the rest of her.

“I thought you thought tans were vulgar,” he says.

“Shut up,” she says.

He hears her talking to Angeline. “I’m just wild about him,” she says. “He’s the most stern, solid person I’ve ever met.” He supposes she is talking about him. People are not as scandalized as one might think. Simonds admits he was wrong about her. Although the Englishwomen in the colony are disappointed. Another bachelor taken off the market. Whispered: “she did swoop down and grab him before anyone even knew he was in town.”

For him, there have been others, of course—the missionary’s daughter in town in New Delhi, always ill and wan, though beautiful; the clever, hopeful spinster on the boat over from Penang—the women who say they’re looking for adventure but who are really looking for husbands. He’s managed to avoid the inconvenience of love for quite some time, but it seems to have found him in this unlikely place.

Women don’t like Trudy. “Isn’t that always the case, darling?” she says when he, indiscreetly, asks her about it. “And aren’t you a strange one for bringing it up?” She chucks him under the chin and continues making a pitcher of gin and lemonade. “No one likes me,” she says. “Chinese don’t because I don’t act Chinese enough,
Europeans don’t because I don’t look at all European, and my father doesn’t like me because I’m not very filial. Do you like me?”

He assures her he does.

“I wonder,” she says. “I can tell why people like you. Besides the fact that you’re a handsome bachelor with mysterious prospects, of course. They read into you everything they want you to be. They read into me all that they don’t like.” She dips her finger in the mix and brings it out to taste. Her face puckers. “Perfect,” she says. She likes them sour.

Little secrets begin to spill out of Trudy. A temple fortune-teller told her the mole on her forehead signifies death to a future husband. She’s been engaged before, but it ended mysteriously. She tells him these secrets then refuses to elaborate, saying he’ll leave her. She seems serious.

Trudy has two amahs. They have “tied their hair up together,” she explains. Two women decide not to marry and let a space in the newspaper, like vows, declaring they will live together forever. Ah Lok and Mei Sing are old now, almost sixty, but they live in a small room together with twin beds (“so get that out of your mind right now,” Trudy says lazily, “although Chinese are very blasé about that sort of thing and who cares, really”) and are a happy couple, excepting that they are both women. “It’s the best thing,” Trudy says. “Lots of women know they’ll never get married so this is just as good. So civilized, don’t you think? All you need is a companion. That sex thing gets in the way after a while. A sisterhood thing. I’m thinking about doing it myself.” She pays them each twenty-five cents a week and they will do anything for her. Once, he came into the living room to find Mei Sing massaging lotion onto Trudy’s hands while she was asleep on the sofa.

He never grows used to them. They completely ignore him, always talking to Trudy about him, in front of him. They tell her he has a big nose, that he smells funny, that his hands and feet are
The Piano Teacher

grotesque. He is beginning to understand a little of what they say, but their disapproving intonation needs no translation. Ah Lok cooks—salty, oily dishes he finds unappealing. Trudy eats them with relish—it’s the food she grew up with. She claims Mei Sing cleans, but he finds dust balls everywhere. The old woman also collects rubbish—used beer bottles, empty jars of cold cream, discarded toothbrushes—and stores it underneath her bed in anticipation of some apocalyptic event. All three of the women are messy. Trudy has the utter disregard for her surroundings that belongs to those who have been waited on since birth. She never cleans up, never lifts a finger, but neither do the amahs. They have picked up her habits—a peculiar symbiosis. Trudy defends them with the ferocity of a child defending her parents. “They’re old,” she says. “Leave them alone. I can’t bear people who poke at their servants.”

She pokes at them though. She argues with them when the flower man comes and Ah Lok wants to give him fifty cents and Trudy says to give him what he wants. The flower man is called Fa Wong, king of flowers, and he comes around to the neighborhood once a week, giant woven baskets slung around his brown, wiry shoulders filled with masses of flowers. He calls out, “fa yuen, fa yuen,” a low, monotonous pitch for his wares, and people wave him up to their flats from the window. He and the amahs love to spar and they go at it for ages, shouting and gesticulating, until Trudy comes to break it up and give the man his money. Then Ah Lok gets angry and scolds Trudy for giving in too easily, and the old lady and the lovely young woman, their arms filled with flowers, go into the kitchen, where the blooms will be distributed into vases and scattered around the house. He watches them from his chair, his book spread out over his lap, his eyes hooded as if in sleep—he watches her.

He is almost never alone these days, always with her. It is something different for him. He used to like solitude, aloneness, but now he craves her presence all the time. He’s gone without this drug for so
long, he’s forgotten how compelling it is. When he is at the office, pecking away at the typewriter, he thinks of her laughing, drinking tea, smoking, the rings puffing up in front of her face. “Why do you work?” she asks. “It’s so dreary.”

Discipline, he thinks, don’t fall down that rabbit hole. But it’s useless. She’s always there, ringing him on the phone, ready with plans for the evening. When he looks at her, he feels weak and happy. Is that so bad?

They are eating brunch at the Repulse Bay and reading the Sunday paper when Trudy looks up.

“Why do they let these awful companies have advertisements?” she asks. “Listen to this one—‘Why suffer from agonizing piles?’ Is there a need for that? Can’t they be a bit more oblique?” She shakes the newspaper at him. “There’s an illustration of a man suffering from piles! Is that really necessary?”

“My heart,” he says. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.” A displaced Russian in a dinner jacket plays the piano behind him.

“Oh,” she says, as if it’s an afterthought. “My father wants to meet you. He wants to meet the man I’ve been spending so much time with.” She is nonchalant, too much so. “Are you free tonight?”

“Of course,” he says.

They go for dinner at the Gloucester, where Trudy tells him the story of her parents’ meeting while they’re waiting at the bar. She is drinking brandy, unusual for her, which makes him think she might be more nervous than she is letting on. She swirls it around the snifter, takes a delicate whiff, sips.

“My mother was a great Portuguese beauty—her family had been in Macau for ages. They met there. My father was not as successful then, although he came from a well-to-do family. He had just started up a business selling widgets or something. He’s very clever, my father. Don’t know why I turned out to be such a dim bulb.” Her
face lights up. “Here he is!” She leaps off the stool and rushes over to
give her father a kiss. Will had expected a big, confident man with
the aura of power. Instead, Mr. Liang is small and diffident, with
an ill-cut suit and a sweet air. He seems to be overwhelmed by the
vitality of his daughter. He lets Trudy wash over him, like a force
of nature, much like everyone else in Hong Kong, Will thinks. The
maître d’ seats them with much hovering and solicitous hand waving,
which neither Trudy nor her father seems to notice. They speak
to each other in Cantonese, which makes Trudy seem like a differ-
ent person entirely.

They do not order. Their food is brought to them, as if preor-
dained. “Should we order?” he ventures and their faces are astonished.
“You only eat certain dishes here,” they say. Trudy calls for champagne.
“This is a momentous occasion,” she declares. “My father’s not met
many of my beaus. You’ve passed the first gauntlet.”

Wan Kee Liang does not ask Will about his life or his work.
Instead, they exchange pleasantries, talk about the horse races and
the war. When Trudy excuses herself to go to the powder room, her
father motions for Will to come closer.

“You are not a rich man,” he says.
“Not like you, but I do all right.” How odd to assume.
“Trudy very spoiled girl, and wants many things.” The man’s
face betrays nothing.
“Yes,” Will says.
“Not good for woman to pay for anything.”
Trudy’s father hands him an envelope.
“Here is money for you to take Trudy out. Will cover expenses
for a long time. Not good for Trudy to be paying all the time.”
Will is utterly bemused.
“I can’t take that,” he says. “I’m not going to take your money.
I’ve never let Trudy pay for a meal.”
“Doesn’t matter.” The man waves his hand. “Good for your
relationship.”

The Piano Teacher
Will refuses and puts the envelope on the table, where it sits until they see Trudy approaching. Trudy’s father puts it back in his suit jacket.

“Not meant to be insult,” he says. “I want best for Trudy. So best for her means best for you. This means little to me, but might make difference for you two.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Will says. “But I can’t.” He lets it go at that.

The next week, Will receives letters in the post from restaurants and clubs around town informing him that his accounts have been opened and are ready for use. One has a note scribbled in the margin, “Just come in, you won’t even need to sign. We look forward to seeing you.” The tone: apologetic to a good customer, but deferring to the wishes of their best.

He is a little irritated, but not so much, more bemused than anything. He puts the letters in a drawer. He supposes that to Wan Kee Liang everyone looks like a pauper, looking for handouts. The Chinese are wise, he thinks. Or maybe it’s just Trudy’s family.

Trudy loves the Parisian Grill, is great friends with the owner, a Greek married to a local Portuguese who sees no irony in the fact that he serves the froggiest of foods. She refuses absolutely to go to a Chinese restaurant with Will, will only go with Chinese people, who she says are the only ones who appreciate the food the way it should be.

The Greek who runs the Parisian Grill, his name is now Henri, changed from God knows what, loves Trudy, views her as a daughter, and his wife, Elsbieta, treats Trudy like a sister. She goes there for first drinks almost every night, often ends evenings there as well. Henri and Elsbieta are polite to him, but with a certain reserve. He thinks they have seen too many of Trudy’s beaus. He wants to
protest that he is the one in danger, protest over the red vinyl banquettes, the smoky white candles burned down to smudgy lumps, but he never does.

They meet everyone at the Parisian Grill. It is the sort of place one goes to when one is new in town, or old, or bored. Hong Kong is small, and eventually everyone ends up there. One night, they have drinks at the bar with a group of visiting Americans and then are invited to dinner with them.

Trudy tells their new friends that she loves Americans, their open-handed extravagance, their loud talk and braying confidence. When someone brings up the war, she pretends not to hear, ignoring them and instead going on about the qualities she feels all Americans have. They have a sense of the world being incomparably large, she says, and a sense that they are able to, not colonize, but spread through all countries, spending their money like water, without guilt or too much consciousness. She loves that. The men are tall and rangy, with long faces and quick decisions, and the women let them be, isn’t that wonderful, because they’re so busy with their own committees and plans. They invite all and sundry to their events, and they serve marvelous items like potato salads and ham and cheese sandwiches. And, unless there is a very special type of Englishman present (she tips her head toward Will), they tend to diminish the other men in the room. It’s very odd, but she’s seen it. Haven’t you noticed that? If she had it all to do over, she says to the dinner table, she would come back as an American. Barring that possibility, she’s going to marry one. Or maybe just move there, if someone objects to her marrying an American, said with eyes cast demurely down as a joke. Will thinks back to when she complained that they were tiresomely earnest and just smiles. She has free will, he says simply. He would never do anything to stop her from doing what she wanted. The Americans applaud. An enlightened man, says a woman with red lips and an orange dress.
Life is easy. At the office, he is expected in at nine-thirty, then a two-hour lunch is not uncommon, and they knock off at five for drinks. He can go out every night, play all weekend, do whatever he wants. Trudy’s friends move to London and want someone responsible to take care of their flat, so Will moves to May Road and pays the ludicrous rent of two hundred Hong Kong dollars, and this only after much wrangling to get her friends, Sudie and Frank Chen, to take anything at all. They all go out for dinner, and it’s very civil. “You’re doing us a favor!” they cry, as they pour more champagne.

“E...
when I needed plimsolls for the beach. There’s this wonderful shop there…”

And then she’s on to something else, crying out to Ah Lok that the flowers are browning, or that there’s a puddle in the foyer. At Trudy’s, there’s no talk of war, no fighting except squabbling with the servants, no real troubles. There’s only ease and her sweet, lilt- ing laugh. He slips gratefully into her world.