

JUST ONE SIP MORE*

John Biggs

Just one sip. That was all it needed. My first red wine in years. As the taste sank into my tongue, it shattered into memories. Memories that blew my heart apart.

The warm, earthy imprint told of sun, of long, warm nights, of fulfilment. Of you. Its bitter aftertaste told of pain, of treachery, of desolation. Of you.

Ten years ago to the day, Owen. That's when you said you were leaving me. And now, ten years later, after receiving your little coded message, here is my answer. On this tape. But unlike you, I am being honest.

Those rows we had, over nothing, out of nothing. You created those quarrels. You needed them.

"Our problems are cultural, you see." That's what you said, all those years ago. And then you added: "What else can you expect in a mixed marriage?"

Aiyaaa. To throw that in so brutally, this sudden new problem, after nearly twenty years of happiness here in Hong Kong! No, it was not "cultural", as you *gwailos* so conveniently put it when it suits you. How dare you turn round and blame me for being Chinese!

It was so unlike you to play the cultural card. But because you did, I concluded that you were leaving me for some other reason. What other reason? Did you think that lie about culture was kinder than telling me what I thought was the real reason? Kinder than telling me you were leaving me because you were sick of me? That you couldn't stand me any more? That's what I thought.

But then some kind person told me of *her*. And no, I don't think now that you were trying to spare my feelings with those lies about culture. I think the feelings you were trying to spare were your own. How uncomfortable you would have been standing there, looking into my tilted eyes, confessing your treachery! Daring to say that years of commitment to me had been a mistake, an illusion. "I'm so sorry, my dear, but I have found my true love at last. It's not you after all. Sorry about that."

No. You couldn't say that. You were too weak.

And yes, it feels much worse to be rejected because you have been unfaithful with someone else, and love her more than me, than it is to be rejected because you dislike me. Just in case you were wondering. Far worse. When treachery stabs, the wound is mortal. We had built a world together, you and I. We had built it out of love. And then I find that that wonderful and unique world

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of ours has been invaded, pillaged, and destroyed. A traitor had let the enemy in through a secret door only you and I knew existed. That traitor was you.

When I found out that she was a *gwaipor*, it was even worse. Do you know why? It was because of your first lie, about our supposed cultural difficulties. I imagine you plugged that line in order to prepare the world for what was to come, to keep face amongst your *gwailo* friends. I leave it to you to imagine how putting all that together made me feel. But I doubt you could imagine that, so let me tell you. You had reassessed our love, our world, as having less value than a cheap, racist stereotype. That's how it made me feel.

Thank you for all that. Because with all that subterfuge, you made sure I went through two hells: the hell of rejecting me for what I am, and the hell of rejecting me for what I am not. Simple arithmetic calculates that I am less than nothing in your eyes.

Then you gave me your final gift. A lonely, desolate, old age. A pill of lasting bitterness that is, especially for a single, aging Chinese woman marooned in an enclave of Westerners. A woman who once loved food, wine, and company. Oh yes, I used to get invitations to dinner. But they were surely offered out of pity, I thought, and with the expectation, if not the hope, of refusal. Pity for the poor Chinese *tai tai*, the victim of embarrassing cultural difficulties. Poor thing, she is left to swim in what is now a choppy sea of sharp, white faces. The faces of our one-time friends. So I spared them that embarrassment. Pride made me refuse those invitations, although part of me longed to accept. Everyone must have been so relieved.

Pity, pride, and memory. How they paralyse! But you wouldn't know that, you who are bereft of all three. So I remain here, paralysed, in the social wheelchair you made for me. Can you work that out, you, once so proud of your cultural sensitivity?

Another sip.

The taste, so familiar, so dear, as was once your face. The taste, as nostalgic as the setting sun. It is setting now as I watch, a huge, red ball rolling behind Lantau Peak. Why, just why, does sunset haul out the pleasures and the dreams of the long gone past? Why is sunrise so different? For me it is different, so different. When I see the sun rising now, it is to light up the shadows and valleys of a long night's desolation, clearly now, in sharp relief. A desolation made not of faded dreams, but of present pain.

Not that you would know such a sunrise. You sleep deeply, you always did. Now I know why. It is because you sleep the sleep of one who has no pity, who has no pride, and whose memory conveniently deceives.

But you saw the sun rise, once at least. That I know. At Tai Long Wan, after the Butler party in their Shek O mansion. Remember? Such a boring overture to the happiest night of my life. Yes,

the happiest night of my life. Did you know that? And do you know why it was? We left the party with a bottle of their Taittinger, and drank it on the beach. We swam the dawn in, nude. We made love. That sun rose to illuminate our love of long ago, not the desolation of today.

Then, driving home. You thought I was asleep, but I was not. My closing eyelids were framing your face. You were so relaxed. You were smiling as your hands caressed the steering wheel. Those hands, so gentle, so strong, that not an hour before had been caressing me. It was then, at that moment, that I knew. I knew that we had just created Louisa, you and I. You and I, on the sand, at the water's edge, the final mingling of our two bloodlines.

As I watched you driving, words came. Somewhere from my religious past, I suppose. How right they seemed then. *My beloved is mine, and I am his.*

No longer.

Another sip, another scene.

"Not champagne," you said. "The best red possible." La Mission Haut Brion, the '59 no less. Oh, that was a hard birth, but you were there. I squeezed your hand so tight, my ring bruised your fingers. You didn't complain, you didn't even wince. How I thought you loved me. Did you, Owen? I'll never know. But that wine, when I was so sore, so exhausted, so in need. It was so *good!* My mouth tested its strength, then handed it to my weakened body. My body then passed that strength to Louisa. And you were there, the source, the strength, as warm and strong as that wine. For ever, I thought.

Louisa! Our shared creation from Tai Long Wan. She was the distillate of the best of our two biologies. Do you remember her first day at school? She looked so fragile, so pretty, so *gorgeous* in her new uniform. She was nervous. So we both took her, not just me, not just you. We each held a hand, as we walked through the school gates, squeezing love and courage from our hands into hers. We – both of us – were to introduce her to the headmistress, jointly committing our Louisa to her care. We were affirming by that mutual act that this fusion of Celtic and Chinese blood was very special.

It was indeed special. Do you remember her valedictory speech as Head Girl at Speech Night? I think we both nearly died of pride. So beautiful, so poised, this twice endowed young lady, her world before her. What miracle of our two chemistries could create such a being?

I drink to her, now. To Louisa.

Ah yes, we were so happy us three, for all those years. Yes, we were! Don't let your memory deceive you again. Then she too, she left. Nine years ago, on the first anniversary of your abandonment. She announced it with a cliché, and that gave the game away, because our Louisa doesn't usually deal in clichés.

“I have to get on with my life, Mum.” That is what she said.

Did her father’s example lead her to reject her Chinese apportionment?

If anyone knows that answer you do. You and your racially correct loved one saw her more than I did. How that hurt. You have no idea how that hurt. She phones. She keeps telling me she’ll come up and see me. And she does, occasionally. She loves me. At an acceptable distance.

Then today. She didn’t come to see me, just to see me. She came from you, as your beautiful, winged messenger. She told me the Love-of-your-life has departed this life. I can’t say I’m sorry, but I hope she didn’t suffer. Not too much.

Finally, Louisa came to the point. She said what she really came to say.

“Dad’s lonely, Mum.”

Poor Dad. Poor, poor Dad. Oh, how my heart bleeds for him. So he thought he had his fall-back position, was that it? That his devoted little Chinese concubine would be patiently waiting for him after all these years *hai ma*?

Well. When Louisa left after delivering her message, do you know what your little concubine did? She opened one of your precious old Bordeauxs that you’d left behind. The best I could find: a Margaux. That’s what I’m drinking now. Then I plugged in the cassette recorder. Louisa will pick up this tape tomorrow, and your little messenger can give it to you, with my compliments.

And that’s it. That’s all I have to say. Just one sip did the trick, flooding my mind with memories. Memories of the two people I have in all my life loved most of all. But *live* with you, my enemy, my arch-betrayer? Now older, querulous, in mourning for she who destroyed me? That’s not the person who once warmed my life. And does still, in memory.

You see, memories are my present reality. The present is a memory I long to forget.

Ah, yes. Just one sip more.