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An excerpt from "Skimming" by Claire Tham. Published by Times Books International, 1999, pages 104-109.

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David

I

He loved her, of course he did—in his own way, not in Wai Keong's way, perhaps, that faithful, deathless, romantic way that was as potent and useless as a dead jellyfish, but in his own way. For him, love was an adjunct of manipulation: he'd manipulated her because he loved her, and he loved her even more because he'd manipulated her. Seeing her in Wai Keong's room in London, he'd felt that premonitory crackle of electricity down his spine, the stirrings of battle. He'd heard that covetousness was a sin. Heard that, in the dim, sleepy religious service he'd endured through his teenage years in the good school he loved to hate. What nonsense, he'd always thought. Covetousness was second nature to him, so ingrained a reflex he'd practically ceased to notice it, like an intestinal worm with which he'd long since made a medical accommodation. He had coveted Wai Keong's life, for as long as he could remember.

She hadn't liked him, that first time. He was unperturbed. He knew her type. Clever, middle-class, a good deal more sheltered than she looked, paid lip service to feminist principles but probably liked having a good man to wind around her finger. Wai Keong, he could tell, was completely felled by her. "I hate smart women," he'd said, to provoke her. It had been as simple as that: he'd wanted to see just how far he could go in testing her limits. She was a woman with a battery of limits, enticingly provokable.

At that stage, he could not have said, quite honestly, whether she was good-looking or even what she looked like. Unlike Wai Keong, he simply didn't notice these things, until they were practically under his nose. His first instinct, on meeting people,

was to probe their frailties, the things that made them wake with a start in the middle of the night. It was only after he'd unearthed, and filed away, this information, that he could turn to the comparatively unimportant (for him) business of ordinary socialisation. He only noticed that Li was small, that she had long, smooth waterfall hair which didn't really suit her, and a stare that almost razored him.

He'd set out quite cold-bloodedly to win her, and falling in love was the last thing he expected. He'd enjoyed the campaign, the lightning visits to London, seeing her startled, unsettled expression, the questions scuttling transparently through her mind, *should I tell Wai Keong, should I not?* Like many secretive, and manipulative, people, he was perversely attracted to honesty in others. And Li was honest, her inability to mask her feelings giving her at times an almost faux-naif quality, as if she were some wild child that had wandered out of a wood and had to re-learn the rules of ordinary discourse from scratch. He felt almost sorry for her sometimes, for her total lack of defences, yet found it hard to resist himself. "What's the worst pain you've ever experienced?" he'd asked her, knowing that anybody else would have turned on him, snarled, at that point. Instead, she'd answered him, quite seriously, biting on her lower lip in that way she had, and wrapping strands of hair around her finger. And he'd wanted so badly to reach out and touch that lower lip of hers, tell her that she couldn't always trust people, that they were not going to be as tender with her vulnerabilities as he was. He'd refrained, only because he knew it was too soon, and he didn't want to scare her. The impulse had been out of character for him, and when he got back to Oxford, he'd sat in his low chair by the soaring windows of his room for a long time, nursing what felt like an open wound cankering somewhere in his body but was only the realisation that he was done for, totally and absolutely, and that he had never planned for this.

Skimming

She got to him, in a way that no-one had ever done before, or ever would. What started out as a game became serious. She had probably cost him his First. Almost every weekend of that third, crucial year, he found himself taking the coach down to London, drifting, almost against his will, to the places where he knew Li would go, either alone or with Wai Keong. He watched her in Chinatown, shopping for foodstuffs. He watched her going to the library, books carried with both hands in front of her, her chin tucked low into her muffler. In spring, he watched them in the park, picnicking, reading the newspapers, throwing sticks for dogs to catch. He saw Wai Keong lope an arm around her waist, and kiss her on the ear, and Li frown, and wriggle away. She hated public displays of affection, he knew; it was one of the reasons he'd camped it up with Clarissa, who loved a show, for her benefit.

He suspected that Li, at least, was aware of his presence; often, while walking along the street, she would look back, suddenly, and he would have to duck into doorways, alleys. She never actually caught him, though; he was too good for that. During his army service, he'd always been the scout, the navigator; he had the uncanny ability to see in the dark, to materialise, unseen, in places where he wasn't supposed to be. Twice, though, he could not resist appearing before her, like a tawdry jack-in-the-box, just to remind her that he still existed. To keep his hand, as it were, in the till.

He never doubted that he would prevail, although he hadn't counted on her stubborn loyalty to Wai Keong. That was the other thing he liked about her, her scruples. "That's because you haven't any," Clarissa told him. "You're constantly looking to other people to compensate for your deficiencies."

"It's called the principle of equilibrium," he said.

He and Clarissa understood each other. She, like Li, was also completely honest, which was why he'd liked her instantly.

She was also, as he had cause to know, unnervingly sharp. The night after the dance, she'd said to him, "I saw you looking at her tonight."

Innocently: "Who?"

She'd surveyed him out of those bottomless green eyes. White people's eyes fascinated him, they had an unbearably naked quality in their transparency, as though you could see clean through their skulls. "She's not your type," Clarissa said. "You'll be *miserable* together, darling. Not to mention that it seems rather hard on that poor sap."

He shrugged. There had to be winners and losers after all. At the time, he simply took her prediction as a challenge.

Following her to Calais had been an inspired impulse. He was tiring of the chase, and was seriously considering sitting them all down for a *talk*, God forbid. It would have been the civilised thing to do, but it was not his way, and the thought of it made his hair stand on end. Not once did he consider himself as being consciously duplicitous towards Wai Keong; he had the capacity to rationalise all his actions, questionable ones included, and to launder them cleanly in the only guiding principle he acknowledged, which was that the ends justify the means. He knew she was not in love with Wai Keong. That correct exterior of hers hadn't fooled him; she was someone on the cusp, waiting to be made real to herself. He knew her better than she did herself. At school, it was not the wild girls who had interested him, though he had taken full advantage of them, but the others, the shadowy ones with the banked-up fires.

He told himself he was doing Wai Keong a favour: a relationship where the feeling ran all in one direction would collapse under its own unequal weight. He was relieving them of future misery. Not wanting to concede that one-sidedness might have its advantages:

the party with the deficiency of feeling would have no illusions, might have tried harder, out of compunction, if nothing else, to hide that deficiency and make things work. And conveniently forgetting, for the moment, the case of his own parents: each had been in love with the other, and neither, it seemed, had been particularly happy.

He'd lost them both, in that strange crush at the crossroads when that drunken girl had gone berserk, or so it seemed. The girl awakened an uneasy memory of another girl he had known in school, who had hung around him like a limpet, couldn't be shaken off. She too had that same saucer-eyed emaciation, the same hunger for self-abasement. He had not been nice to her, he had told her, in the crudest language he could think of, that he didn't want to see her. She hadn't heard a word he said; she'd followed the motion of his lips, with her eyes, and then she'd pulled his hand under her blouse. Snatching his hand away, he'd backed off, staring at her as though she were an untamed animal that might maul or bite. She'd upset him more than he'd cared to admit; for the first time in his life, he'd crashed up against a stronger force than his own will, something he couldn't control. Even now, he didn't like to think about it.

He had searched for them for a while, then given up. There was no point going to their room at this hour. Confrontations were not his style. He knew where to find Li, if he needed to. He knew he'd won. He'd seen it in her face, at the beach, when he'd cracked his stupid joke and fallen off the wall: she hadn't been able to look at him. He slept, dreamlessly, on the beach, under the stars.

In the event, neither he nor Li had been required to break the paralysis: Wai Keong had done it all. Something had pierced his

obliviousness, and no explanations were necessary. They met him at the door of the pensione, bags packed. He said he was leaving. "See you in London," Li offered, brightly. Betrayal made her glib, frantic; she looked fearlessly into his face, and it was he who had to turn away. Not once did he look in David's direction; it was as if he simply didn't exist. David said nothing. He didn't underestimate Wai Keong's pain, but he did believe in quick deaths and not prolonging hope unnecessarily. Someday, he telegraphed silently to Wai Keong, you'll understand.

Suddenly, they had the rest of the afternoon to themselves, leisurely, enticing, a little frightening.

Li said, "What are we going to do?"

Her face was sort of liquid, without actual tears. Wilfully, he chose to take her question in the practical sense. "Let's go swimming," he suggested.

Her eyebrows lifted in amazement.

"In the sea," he qualified, and reached out to touch her face.

"Don't," she said, moving away.

His hand dropped away. She was looking up at him through tangled hair, like a supplicant. He said, testing her, "Do you want to go after him?"

She said, after what seemed like a very long time, so softly that he could barely hear, "No."

They went to the Matisse museum, he remembered, and wandered through the rooms, holding hands. He remembered an explosion of colour, life-size amoebic figures splayed on blue canvases, the shades drawn to filter out the glare, and the hum of the ancient air-conditioning, so loud that the building itself seemed to shudder in rhythm. Her fingers shifted about in his, exploring,