

## Helene Littmann / REWIND

"Petra Kobaray is looking well," said Claris. "I saw her at Everett and Diane's New Year's Day open house."

"She's in Paris now, isn't she? With the wire news service?" said Pat.

"I think so," said Claris. "We didn't really talk." Stricker didn't say anything, didn't even nod, though he knew this to be true; he didn't want to let on that he was in regular contact again with Petra. Her e-mails were short, and sometimes very dirty.

"Wasn't she bilingual? From Quebec?" said Pat.

"Quadrilingual at least," said Stricker. This was old knowledge, therefore safe. "Four-tongued. Is that physically possible?" And Petra, he knew, could certainly use her tongue. "Anyhow," he added. "From some poky Montreal suburb. I don't think she had any idea the languages bit would matter. Back when half of Europe was still a no-go zone."

The three of them – Stricker, Claris, Pat – were sitting in the mild summer evening on the side patio of a deserted sports pub in East Vancouver. A row of white plastic tables and chairs; a narrow wooden porch, vaguely Wild West; a view of an empty parking lot and, across that, the flat stucco sidewall of the next building.

"Everett and Diane have two kids now, little girls," said Claris. So she wasn't going there, wasn't going back to the old knowledge, back before the Berlin Wall fell. Stricker was testing, with no definite goal in mind. Did he *want* to discuss the 1980s with Claris? Before the wall fell, and other things, too. Him and Claris, of course, but more centrally, more *interestingly*, him: his youthful sardonic promise, his disastrous two years at grad school, and then Asia.

Asia. *An old China hand* was what some of the long-term British expatriates in Hong Kong called themselves, only half mockingly. British ex-pats were good for Stricker, or at any rate relaxing: they never found him particularly cynical, unlike his fellow Canadians. And of course his quips went over the heads of his English-language students. Witty barbs don't translate well at the lower-intermediate level. He sometimes worried that ten years of careful enunciation had irreversibly taken the edge off his conversation.

China hand, India hand. The retired colonel on half pay in the three-volume nineteenth-century novel, back from running an empire – servants, random violence, tiger hunts – now no one special in a semi-detached where? Maida Vale? A figure of fun,

with his endless stories, his dull days at the club. Stricker hadn't run an empire but he had been an honoured foreigner, people talked to him, forgave his gaucheries. It was addictive. Tonight, back in Vancouver, maybe for good, he didn't really want to discuss Claris with Claris. But he did want to discuss himself. He wanted a mirror, a mirror into the past.

"It's hard to imagine Ev as a father," Pat said now.

Ev. That was a new one, and suggested more familiarity than Stricker had assumed. Pat didn't look like anyone Everett would have known in the old days. But people change: Pat, Everett. Maybe Pat used to be skinny. Maybe Everett now found many types of people useful. Maybe Pat was friends with the wife.

"It's hard to imagine anyone as a father, isn't it," said Stricker. As far as he knew, no one at the table had children.

"Oh, absolutely. Think about being a parent," said Pat, with a rapid, good-natured firmness that suggested she had, in fact, thought this all through, and said it several times before. "I mean, what are you aiming for? A happy childhood? Or a happy adulthood? Either way, they'll resent you. Someone to look after you in your old age? If you raise your kid right they'd be nowhere *near* you in old age. They'd be hitch-hiking in India or working in Moscow. C'mon kid, get a *life*."

"Bill's got kids, doesn't he?" said Claris.

"Almost done high school," said Pat. "I've seen what he's going through. There may be such a thing as baby-cravings. But I guarantee you no one has ever gone all weepy wishing they had a cute little 14 year old to cuddle. It's like exotic pets. Once they grow teeth they get feral and you have to let them loose in the jungle."

"Bill doesn't want any more," said Claris.

"Bill is not that kind of masochist," said Pat. "We've got our agreements worked out. We do what we want."

This was aimed, obliquely, as much at Stricker as it was at Claris. He did not quite think the invitation was sexual. And he didn't think his own mental step backward was sexual, either, not in any obvious way. Pat was heavy, carrying about 30 or 40 extra pounds, which made her 40 or 50 pounds heavier than Stricker; she was at the point where plump is just beginning to slide into fat. Her feet were planted flat on the floor, her hair was springy, coarse, shoulder-length, she wore jeans and a T-shirt. She was a computer network systems administrator at a community college, though not the one where Stricker was starting work in three weeks. She looked like everyone else in the world, no better, no worse. None of this necessarily excluded her from sexual consideration. Her rapid agreement with his refusal of fatherhood should have made



Stricker warm up to her; he was usually sympathetic when people neatly lobbed his own views back at him; but in this case, it didn't work.

For Stricker cherished his refusals; they were elliptical, shadow-lit, perhaps the only art form he had ever successfully practiced. To keep him from surges of self-loathing, they needed to be, above all, tangential, counter-intuitive, original. And he couldn't *stand* how Pat made it all so common sense, so day lit (though it was finally growing dark out beyond the porch lights and streetlights). What after all was the value of refusal if it *made sense* to refuse something?

Stricker loved his refusals. And, yes, he had studied Henry James – before he refused that, too. He left Claris to go back East to do a dissertation on the late novels, and after a year or two he refused James, and left the country. Though Stricker never saw himself in James's neurasthenic, asexual bachelors. For one thing, Stricker had never knowingly turned down an opportunity for sexual intercourse – at least not until the last five years, when a new clairvoyance for wearily predictable complications began to set in. Moreover, Stricker didn't believe that he made his own refusals, as James's heroes did, from willed ignorance or innocence. He was convinced his own were made from the fullest possible intelligence, the social second sight that had lately extended itself even to his sexual adventures: a firm base of worldly knowledge that said nothing, ever, would be quite worth the effort. You could be anything you wanted if you were willing to slog – but the prize won would turn out to be drudgery into infinity, after you couldn't back out. Being smart meant not selling short, buying into a life nowhere near the shining potential that shimmered like the flash of lightning on the leading edge of a squall line far out to sea.

At least, Stricker had felt like this until quite recently. Meanwhile, he had been living in ways that made it true: a stranger in strange lands, and often deliriously happy with the arrangement. Did he still feel this way? If not, what else *was* there – how else *could* you see the situation?

But here, now, on the shabby deck of this empty pub, the last light draining unheeded from the clear sky, what was Stricker *doing*, as he sipped his second pint of local microbrew? What was he *doing here*? The question did not actually arise for Stricker. A mildly misdirected evening, the fundamental disinterest inherent in meeting most new people: Stricker had traveled enough that this was no longer disappointing: it was expected. Of course the draw was Claris: she was an "old friend." Stricker did not write it like that, but when he talked about her, which was not so often, the scare quotes were audible.

Claris, then. He had come out to see Claris, who produced Pat as duenna, under the excuse of the more, the merrier: "I'll get some people together," Claris had said. But even without Pat, Stricker would hardly have made the mildest flirtatious move.

At twenty Claris had been painfully shy at parties or around the noisy tables of beer parlors. *Shy* might be the wrong word: she wasn't paralyzed by self-consciousness so much as watchfully reticent. At twenty, in T-shirt and jeans, Claris had been pleasant-looking but unremarkable; naked, she was astoundingly lovely, small-boned, slim, but with every edge and angle perfectly rounded. For a shy girl, she had never been uncomfortable naked, had strolled straight from the shower to the kitchen fridge when Stricker's roommates were gone for the day, never worried about curtains, sunned placidly at his side in the nude down the cliffs at Wreck Beach. Her privacy lived deeper than her skin; merely being naked revealed nothing. Back then, she wore makeup only on ceremonial occasions, and to Stricker, it made her plainer rather than prettier, clotting the texture of her perfect eyelashes, hardening her mouth, giving her a pinched face like every other girl at the mall.

At thirty, Claris cut her long hair; this summer, in her early forties, she wore it in a bob tucked behind her ears; it was almost chic, but fell too flat and fine. She wore light eye-makeup all the time now, and often lipstick, and maybe – Stricker was never close enough to verify – foundation or powder. A face prepared to meet the world. Claris put out a corporate newsletter and local brochures, not the full-colour ad campaigns; those were done in Toronto or New York. She was still slim, but in her summer khakis her hips and thighs were wider than Stricker remembered. They did not look fat or soft, just time-thickened. If the girl he once knew was still present, she had gone deeper under the skin than ever. Claris was a functioning adult; yes, and they all were, even Stricker. Met new, would Claris be attractive? Stricker couldn't tell. They had chewed each other up too thoroughly, and they had healed; but the thought of sex with Claris – and, OK, the thought was always there, a heat-flicker at the edge of perception – gave Stricker a queasy incestuous feeling.

Meanwhile, tonight, on this shabby side porch, with the sift of night insects around the caged lights nailed high on the wall behind them: Stricker wanted Claris's attention. He didn't want to discuss Claris, he wanted to discuss himself. And he didn't truly think Pat was a chaperone. But she was taking up physical space, verbal space. Now she was talking with Claris about people Stricker didn't know. Claris looked animated enough. Was this was a public face, or her private one, how she talked at the office water-cooler, or how she looked under the sheets at night? Actually, he didn't care; and he didn't care, much, about Everett and Diane; Petra Kobaray had told him more



on that score than Claris would, or Everett himself. But his quip about fatherhood had cut Claris off, given Pat the floor; and so Stricker backtracked.

"Claris," he said. "So tell me about Everett and Diane. How old are the kids now?"

"Three and five," said Claris. "They're doing well. They've fixed up an arts and crafts bungalow on the South Slope."

"I love that house," said Pat. "With the built-in cupboards and the porch."

"Everett's still at the newspaper," said Claris. This was the big daily in town. "Still doesn't like it that much but there's nowhere to move on."

None of this was news to Stricker, but then how much conversation actually is? Claris was looking at him, she was responding to his questions.

At least he thought he had Claris' attention. Because right at that moment, her gaze shifted over his shoulder; a woman, long hair against the light, was walking the length of the deck, pulling up a chair.

"Oh, Claris, I'm so sorry," she said, prettily flustered. "Who all is here? I got a long distance call at the last moment," she added, her voice falling confidentially. "One of those calls you *have* to take."

"Shelly," said Claris. "You remember Charles. Charles Stricker."

"Oh, of course," said Shelly, putting out her hand. She had dropped into the seat next to him, so she didn't extend her arm so much as bend it at the elbow: no hearty businessman's shake, more a receiving-line flutter. As they touched, Shelly locked eyes with him; as he released her hand, she resettled in her seat, tucked her purse under her ankles, and managed in the process – Stricker could tell, he was paying attention – to clock the whole empty patio, the table, the two women, himself.

"Charles," said Shelly, fixing her gaze on his face again. "Of course I remember you." For Stricker was Stricker only in his own private monologue, that long unedited formless home movie that unspools inside each isolated skull among us. To everyone else – friends, not his students – he was Charles. But not Charlie or Chuck. That at least he had prevented.

"I'm still trying to place you," said Stricker. Shelly was part of the welcome-home crowd tonight that Claris had promised him; Shelly, Claris said earlier, knew him from the old days.

"Oh, I was just on the fringes, back then," said Shelly. "I was so much younger than you guys."

Stricker wouldn't have guessed this from her face. Though it was true that his main guides to the passage of time and its human ravages were Claris and Petra, who were each in their own ways holding up well. As for his own face in the mirror: well, that depended on the mirror.

"I remember seeing you everywhere," said Shelly. "You had a pink shirt."

Fuchsia or magenta, actually. "Yes, that was me," said Stricker. And he did believe that, at twenty-five, he and Everett had been visible enough that they might well be pointed out, at a distance, to a college girl on the edge of the music scene.

"So you've been in Asia," said Shelly. "I want to hear all about it."

"Hong Kong for the past five years," said Stricker. "Mostly teaching English at a technical college."

"Is it really gorgeous out there? Do you miss it?"

"I miss it and I don't," he said. "No, I do miss it." There weren't words, yet, for how he did miss it. "But I wanted to come back."

Face to face with Shelly, Stricker was sure he had never seen her before, or if he had, in very different guise. For Shelly looked like a ruined beauty: aquiline nose, hooded eyes, under a skin more decidedly ridged and fatigued than, for instance, Petra or Claris. Shelly looked – there was no way around it – she looked *used*. This was not in itself unattractive, since it carried a strong suggestion of lowered barriers. Stricker would have had no access at all to a girl who looked like Shelly gave promise of having once looked. This made him think she hadn't looked like that, back then. He would have noticed her, even at a distance. Punk girls were almost never beautiful in that classic way; true young beauties had other temptations.

"Is there lots of work out there?" said Shelly. "Someone, a man, was telling me there was lots of work teaching."

"Japan or Korea more than Hong Kong," said Stricker. So perhaps Shelly at eighteen had been just another moon-faced girl; perhaps only later her face fell in, the bones showing through. Something similar, though subtler, had happened to Petra in the long gap before he met up with her again, four years ago, in Hanoi during the rainy season. In certain lights, Petra now looked almost distinguished.

Did Shelly have the mannerisms of a beautiful woman? Well, she had zeroed in on Stricker: as he sat describing Asia, not going much beyond the obvious – there was no need – he turned to face her full on, turned his back on Claris and Pat. And, Stricker saw, this was exactly what he'd been missing. There was nothing like wide-eyed attention to make your own voice unroll in eloquent phrases. This was really, yes, just what he deserved, or rather, what he was used to, recalling as it did the way certain Hong Kong Chinese girls flirted.

And that was how the evening drew to an end. Shelly kept Stricker rapt for how long – fifteen minutes? half an hour? – while Claris and Pat chatted on. Then came a general shuffle and re-assessment: Pat was getting up to leave, Shelly released Stricker, it was so much later than everyone thought – these summer evenings stay light so



long! – Claris half-stifled a yawn, only Stricker wasn't working the next morning. And in five minutes they were out on the sidewalk, unlocking the doors of their separate cars.

Stricker drove home slowly, testing the night air on his neck and bare forearms. He had done two stints in Hong Kong, broken by a year back in Vancouver. That first time back, he'd missed the tropics all along his skin, like an absent lover, a bone-deep loss of the buoyant damp heat. Plus, his temporary contract in Vancouver didn't lead to permanent work, a problem of funding rather than Stricker's performance. For Stricker was, to his own carefully hidden surprise, a good teacher: since he didn't fundamentally care, he could regard his classroom tactics with clinical pragmatism. *Sir, teacher, Mr. Stricker, sir*; he had nothing to do with Stricker, himself.

So Stricker went back to Hong Kong. But that second time around, like a stolen weekend with an old lover you treated badly years ago – and Stricker had certainly had his share of those weekends – something changed. Down on the ferry dock, every foot of public space, some days, was taken up by vendors of hot snacks, newspapers, copy watches, off-brand tennis socks, Yixing purple clay teapots shaped like lotus blossoms or eggplants. Unable to read Chinese, everything came at him on the primary plane of the visual. For a long time this difficulty was exhilarating. It made legitimate something Stricker had known even in Canada: the clues of any culture were opaque to him. But after a while, estrangement became familiar. And then, like any bored husband, Stricker started reading the newspaper every morning at breakfast: that fried egg on instant noodles sold on the lower level of the Lamma Island commuter ferry. The *South China Morning Post* put up a wall of English print between himself and the world he had once gazed at with love and wonder: the soft dark curves of the mysterious back end of Hong Kong Island sliding past, the milky haze of the South China Sea itself.

So Stricker returned to Vancouver, this time to a permanent job. And on this tepid summer night, he was driving home – or rather, back to his sublet in the Tiki Arms. Fifteen years ago, he lived briefly in a basement suite a few blocks below the intersection of Main and Broadway, around the corner from the Tiki Arms, which had crashed through the bottom of the social scale. But over the past decade, redevelopment in the neighborhood sent the building condo. A couple, friends of Claris, had pooled their incomes to get into the tight housing market. Tonight, after riding the elevator up from the mirrored lobby, Stricker noted again that the halls were musty, the brown carpet surely original. But the apartment itself had been gutted and re-decorated in the taste of two years ago, with a palette of muted sage green and cream yellow bringing out an unsuspected high modernist swank to the boxy rooms.

Tonight Stricker wrenched open the sliding doors to the balcony: chili-pepper patio lights, view of alley and dumpster. Then he sunk into the sofa.

You never came back precisely to where you left; you came back to a palimpsest, where you left layered over what it became, and what you had become, too. For Stricker, the modulated symphony of impressions that constituted his drive from the pub to the apartment was rich out of all proportion to his ability to describe it. He had lived too long half-outside language, and he had stopped trying.

And yet: what, thinking back on those days, did Stricker really think of his young self? There had been that pink shirt, worn too often, laundered too rarely. Stricker, stumbling into senior seminar Tuesday afternoons (he never scheduled classes for Mondays if he could help it), every pore fuming like a pub carpet at 2 a.m., woozily hungover, unshowered, unshaven, wearing his debauchery like a combat medal ....

Stricker and his sins. His sins were mortal as well as venial, though these days both the Catholics and the Evangelicals agreed there was no difference: nothing was venial, nothing could be forgiven, everything damned your mortal soul. Stricker's sins were premeditated and unrepentant, and he hit them all: lust, sloth, covetousness, anger, envy, greed, pride. Since Stricker was neither a Catholic nor a Baptist, he didn't care. Besides, he knew there were far worse sins than the simple Christians guessed. Stricker's sins had been, he now knew, aesthetic: he had sinned against good taste and good sense. He had sinned against *art*. But his sins – and this really made him cringe now, lit up his face and his armpits here on the red sofa in the cool empty living room – his sins had been worse even than that. They had been *olfactory*. That pink shirt, or fuchsia if you will, worn too often, laundered too infrequently: Stricker had smelled, he was sure of this now.

So what was Stricker *doing*, out there on the deck of the pub with Claris? What was he *doing*, dodging back around the old knowledge? Did he really *want* to discuss the 1980s with Claris? Shelly had admired from a distance; she had nothing for which to forgive him. And Petra, after all: she had dumped Stricker, before he met Claris; and after a couple of years of high drama had ended up with Everett, with Stricker's best friend. Well, that was only natural; they were the only game in town. But in the subtle dance of remembrance and reconciliation, it was up to Stricker to forgive Petra, which he had done, amply, that rainy week four years ago in ochre and verdant Hanoi (and, truth be told, a couple of times much earlier, while he was still officially "with" Claris). Stricker forgave Petra because he loved how she made his life complex and corrupt. But did he want Claris to forgive him? For what, exactly? Not for the obvious, for leaving her, for breaking her heart. And not for anything as straightforward as wearing that reeking pink shirt.



It was clear to Stricker, now, that at 25 he had been, pretty comprehensively, an asshole. Claris couldn't have thought so or she wouldn't have been in love with him. So she was the wrong witness, wrong confessor: all she could forgive would be specific acts. All she could forgive would be breaking her heart. And Stricker didn't particularly care about that, one way or the other, now, and probably Claris didn't either. He had in fact never asked: you couldn't, without running the risk of a full-scale reconciliation.

If everything is allowed, everything forgivable; if you lust after sloth, take pride in anger, covet lust, and so on; if, fundamentally, nothing really matters: then why shame? Where does it *come* from? For that's what was washing over Stricker, here on the red sofa. Without warning, the palimpsest of the past shifts slightly, one extra layer revealed. The music modulates, a minor key; there's a trick to the camera, the familiar suddenly both washed out and intense. A cheap effect, you say later, but at the moment it works: unease, a dreadful clarity.

Stricker, then, the home movie reeling backwards, here on the red sofa, in the quiet apartment, on this cool, brief northern summer night. Stricker, ashamed. And in the worst way: with nothing to atone for, with no one to forgive him.

