

Ho J.C.

THE CLASSROOM

“Time the destroyer is time the preserver” – *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot

“They got painting class at 5 today,” thought Mrs. Cheung, leaving the door open. Charming creatures, Mrs. Cheung flickered against the wall; they lived and learned so diligently and happily under the protection of her straddling wings. As a mother of two and a professional modern-day businesswoman she provided for the family; she was the exceptional out of the many pathetic women who had lost the spirit to resist after being happily married, while sustaining her hard-earned reputation in the industry. Staring deep into the cracks on the wall beside her, of which her history was embedded, at last Mrs. Cheung concluded, “Those were too hard for them to bear”.

She had not been thankful in her life; in fact she loathed very much her humble origins, her lowly neighbourhood and her lack of parenthood, all of which cemented a dramatic contrast to her impeccably-British-accented children. She did not see herself in her children, as much as she would never have hoped for it; which necessitated a good school, the school she was going to, for example. But other than that, she hated Hong Kong. 10 years did not seem long enough to negotiate the difference – young as she was 18, Mrs. Cheung escaped from the insufferable concrete jungle where she was born and raised to the unknown domain amidst the strife and the economic downturn in 2000. She worked her way up; she earned every bit of success by herself; but all these, Mrs. Cheung thought, were without any association with Hong Kong and its history which she had submissively and involuntarily inherited by birth.

She did not like, even for one second, to think about the past. Ironically she was now standing in this classroom to summon the past which she refused to remember. But since the School Principal insisted, damn you, thought Mrs. Cheung, trying to conceal her rage with the beauty of her face, as if she was a fool who knew nothing about this place where she deeply resented. Every scent, every touch, the same as before, Mrs. Cheung knew it better than anyone else; the blackboard, the desks, the petite library at the corner of the classroom (where she devoured the whole Sherlock Holmes collection) ...It was awful.

Fingers tracing the hard edges of the notice board, Mrs. Cheung saw the smiling faces on the stack of photographs hanging off the board. She only had a few photographs of her youth; but even so her memory was fleeting – only bitterness remained. She hated the classroom, but sometimes she dreamed about it; it was the only classroom where she could get an undisturbed view of the Chapel though the windows. The Chapel was a savior, a guiding light; it soothed her from doubts, disappointments and failures. She walked past the teacher’s desk to take a look at the Chapel.

She was impressed. It was beautiful. It stood quietly and solemnly, their eyes meeting eyes. Mrs. Cheung felt like meeting an old friend she had lost in touch for years, but their friendship did not die out. She had heard of the changes that were taking place in Hong Kong while she was away, about all the dramatic

protests regarding the preservation of Star Ferry Pier, the Queen's Pier, Lee Tung Street and all the sacrifices the community had altered for the so-called "better urban development". Standing in front of the windows, Mrs. Cheung saw not only the Chapel, but images of all the drastic changes happening in Hong Kong all these years since she had been aboard. Mrs. Cheung recalled one of her favourite childhood hangouts, the Windsor House and how now it had changed from a mysterious black to a curious white shopping mall. Even Mrs. Cheung had a little trouble locating her old school.

Mrs. Cheung gazed into the distance. The stern marble building assuaged her, brought light to her in the darkest times; it was her raft, her rallying point in the drifting ocean. But it was different now; she had to admit, the Chapel was decaying. It had stooped down to the ageless profusion of time and became part of its possession.

"All is changed", Mrs. Cheung murmured, in ten years' time.

But did time also preserve something?

A ray of light entered the classroom and showered the room with the glam of evening sunshine. Mrs. Cheung turned her head to it, fascinated and hypnotized as she watched the golden glitters lit up the room and worked its magic, gently kissing every part of her skin. Upon the glistening surface on one of the polished desks, a reflection began to fabricate: it was the image of a girl staring blindly at the blackboard opposite her, distracted as if she did not care. But beneath the perfect harmony of her face it was anger and innocence intertwined, an oppressed emotion she was trying to hide.

She turned and caught Mrs. Cheung smiling gracefully at her. Their eyes met. They had the same eyes.

Mrs. Cheung watched her slowly vanished into the scene. Time had come to destroy and conquer like a malady without a cure. All had changed, but time had also come to preserve – our very own character, the deepest of our souls. With her inner eye she saw now how she was connected to this place and the history she had negated; like a seed embedded in the soil, it nurtured her to become who she was now. A part of her had changed, but deep inside she was still the very old she. Mrs. Cheung was exhilarated.

She walked out of the classroom.