

Uncle Tuck

Until a few years ago, An-Shan's relationship with Uncle Tuck had been much closer than was normal between a nephew and his uncle. This was because less than eight years separated them and because they had lived companionably together for more than fifteen years, in a rambling old house belonging to An-shan's grandfather.

An-Shan's earliest memories of Uncle Tuck had been endearing ones. They were those of someone who was always there when needed, whether as playmate, protector, teacher or friend. When he began his formal education, it had been Uncle Tuck who had escorted him each day to their common missionary school. When his sickly appearance and his poor eyesight made him a figure of fun, it had been Uncle Tuck who had taught him to ignore taunts.

But Uncle Tuck also taught him never to shirk a fight if it came to one, because how and why he fought would be more important than winning or losing. When they went out together, Uncle Tuck would always throw an arm protectively over his shoulders. It was something his own father never did. Later, when Uncle Tuck became the welterweight boxing champion at their school, he had been able to bask in the reflected glory and fellow students treated him with new found respect.

Thus, during those formative years when each child tended to adopt certain characters from fiction or legend as his own particular heroes, An-shan had selected two with names similar to his uncle's -- San Tuck, the fighting monk from Shaolin Temple who was never above breaking his vegetarian vows for a good feed, and Friar Tuck, that jolly companion to Robin Hood. For him the three Tucks formed a loveable trinity.

Such memories gave An-Shan a pleasant glow as he stood indecisively before the staid Victorian building housing his office. His employer was an old but undistinguished accounting firm for whom his father had previously worked. Although the money was modest, the work suited his temperament. Searching out tax loopholes, masterminding write-offs or tinkering with figures to put a better complexion on corporate sickness actually gave him a degree of satisfaction. He knew that in the fullness of time he could count on a partnership, though Uncle Tuck had now turned that prospect into an irrelevance.

An-Shan looked up and down both sides of the pavement. His large head hung tiredly upon his narrow shoulders. The evening exodus from the offices and shops was beginning to thin. He buttoned up his gaberdine overcoat against the winter chill and squinted at his watch from behind his thick horn-rimmed glasses. He had almost an hour to spare before Uncle Tuck's event at the Imperial Hotel, ample

time to make his way there on foot. So, in spite of the cold, he set off with his clumsy knocked-kneed gait, looking prematurely stooped for a man of thirty-one.

An-Shan's heart skipped a beat when it occurred to him that he would have to face Adelaide again at the Imperial. Adelaide! How he adored her! Her haunting eyes and smoky voice were enough to drive him to distraction. But he knew deep down he could never be good enough for her. Nevertheless he had continued to long for her, even after she had started living with Uncle Tuck, and that had been the start of their long and terrible estrangement.

Now that he knew how much Uncle Tuck had cared for him, it was too late to make amends because Uncle Tuck was dead. If only he had been less blinded by jealousy or had known about his uncle's weak heart, he would have behaved less stupidly. Now he was left with only a confused and guilt-ridden regret.

As An-Shan huddled against the cold, he stuck his hands into the pockets of his overcoat. His right hand at once encountered the gilt-edged invitation card. He had read over the text so many times that he could recite it by heart. It read: "The late Tang Tuck requests the pleasure of the company of his dear nephew, An-Shan, at a Farewell Party to be held at the Imperial Hotel Ballroom on November 18, 1983. Cocktails at 7:30 p.m. Dinner at 8:00 p.m. Dress optional." Although the words "his dear nephew, An-Shan," had been typed in, probably by Adelaide, they bore his uncle's familiar touch. How well he could arrange things, An-Shan thought, even a farewell party after death.

An-Shan and his uncle had grown up in Hong Kong in Chinese style, with three generations living under the same roof. His grandfather would not have it otherwise. In his heyday before the Second World War, his grandfather had been a successful silk merchant. He had a knack for determining the quality of a bale of silk by merely sniffing it. He also had a passion for antiques and most of his wealth had been spent on collecting Ming porcelain, jades, bronzes and Chinese paintings.

An-Shan had never set eyes on those fabled treasures, however. By the time he came along the family had already settled into a genteel poverty. According to his mother, most of the antiques had been looted during the war and what remained had been bartered away for food during the bleak years of the Japanese occupation. The loss of the antiques must have broken his grandfather's heart for he remembered him only as a withered old man who paid no attention when greeted and rarely uttered a word. That strange apparition would spend long hours sitting alone in the garden just gazing into space.

His grandmother, again according to his mother, had given birth to Uncle Tuck almost twenty years after her first child. She had died shortly afterwards, from the complications of childbirth and the wartime absence of proper medical care.

For that reason his father had always held his brother responsible for their mother's death and that had given rise to a latent antagonism between them.

Though An-Shan had little appreciation of their impoverished circumstances during his childhood, he could remember clearly things being always in need of repairs somewhere in the house, be it a leak in the roof, a blocked drain, an unhinged door or a broken shutter. The solitary general amah they had was always grumbling about such deficiencies. The garden did not have the attention of anyone, so it was allowed to become hopelessly overgrown. For him, however, that condition was a blessing because Uncle Tuck used that neglected place to devise all manner of games for him. He spent many hours whooping through the undergrowth with his uncle, hunting imaginary wild beasts or dangerous outlaws.

The state of the house had troubled his father constantly because his income seldom kept up with the outgoings. From time to time his father would urge his grandfather to get rid of the property. But the old man would never respond. He would just sit impassively, lost to the world.

The struggle to maintain appearances exacerbated the antagonism between his father and Uncle Tuck. His father was a person who expected gratitude for every benefit he conferred. From his younger brother he expected respect and obedience as well, not only because he was providing for his brother's education and upkeep but also because he regarded himself, by virtue of their father's incapacity, as the ultimate authority in the household.

But Uncle Tuck was not a respecter of authority. He had his own sense of proprieties. He accorded little priority to his school work. Instead he devoted his energies to sports and to reading books of his own choice. His father, on the other hand, regarded much of what his brother read as irreverent and unhealthy. Books by Voltaire, Rabelais, Henry Miller and many others apparently belonged to that undesirable category, though it was doubtful whether his father had actually read any of them. To make matters worse, Uncle Tuck also whiled away what remained of his time in the company of girls. That only served to confirm his father's opinion of his brother as a degenerate. The upshot was endless altercations.

An-Shan recalled the incident that caused his father and his uncle to stop speaking to each other. He was at the centre of it. Whilst playing in the undergrowth in the garden with Uncle Tuck, he had been bitten by a snake. Uncle Tuck had immediately used a penknife to cut across the bite, in spite of his cries of pain, and sucked out the venom. Later, at the hospital, the doctor said he probably would have died if Uncle Tuck had not acted so decisively. But the moment his father learnt of the incident there had been a flaming row.

"I pay for your food and I pay for your education," his father had shouted, "and the only thanks I get is your trying to get my son killed in your crazy games!"

"Stuff your food and your education!" Uncle Tuck had replied. "From now on I don't want a red cent from you."

With that Uncle Tuck quit school, though he had been only a few months from graduation. He eventually joined a newspaper as a cub reporter. He continued to live in the old house but he paid his share of the expenses. The brothers thereafter sat down for meals and went about the house without exchanging a single word.

One evening Uncle Tuck had come to his room in a state of high excitement. "Come quickly, An-Shan," he had said. "I need your help."

He had followed his uncle into the bathroom. Resting on the floor next to the toilet bowl were two stacks of documents. Some of them had been stamped "Confidential" and others "Secret". His uncle sat down on the floor next to the toilet bowl and he followed suit. Uncle Tuck then set a match to one of the sheets and dropped it burning into the toilet bowl.

"I want you to help me burn these papers, sheet by sheet," his uncle said.

"Why are we burning paper, Uncle?"

"Because these papers can get people into trouble."

"How can papers get people into trouble?"

Uncle Tuck had looked at him affectionately and replied: "My dear boy, one of these days you will learn with how little wisdom and honesty our world is governed. These are official documents that chanced to fall into my hands. Don't ask me how. They reveal bungling and scandals at very high levels. I have exposed the scandals in my newspaper and the officials are incensed. They have ordered the security agencies to find out how I came by the information. So I must destroy the evidence to protect my sources."

He had then set about the task with gusto, helping his uncle feed sheet after sheet into the flames. But in his enthusiasm he had fed the flames too quickly so that the difference in temperature between the inside and the outside of the thick bowl caused the receptacle to crack suddenly with a loud noise. It broke into pieces, spewing flushing water and charred remains all over the floor. The disaster had struck so quickly and so unexpectedly that they both laughed hysterically as the spilt water wetted their trousers. They eventually finished burning the documents in the garden. The next day, as Uncle Tuck arranged for the installation of a new toilet bowl, he declared that witnessing such a spectacular explosion had been worth every cent he had to pay.

An-Shan laughed out loud in recalling the incident. The sound of his laughter, snatched up by the wind, resounded along the half-empty street like the

cackling of dry leaves driven along a garden wall. It amazed him how the memory of that evening could retain the power to evoke laughter after twenty years.

A year or so after that incident, his grandfather died. The old house was sold and, according to the wishes of his grandfather, the proceeds were divided between the brothers. That meant that he and his uncle could no longer live under the same roof. But he nevertheless managed to maintain contact with him without his parents finding out.

About two years later, when he was in the final year of secondary school, Uncle Tuck invited him to dinner at an expensive French restaurant. It was the first occasion he had tried escargot or tasted fine vintage wines. After dinner, Uncle Tuck took him to a penthouse apartment with a panoramic view of the Hong Kong harbour. The apartment conveyed such an impression of luxury and refinement that he was overwhelmed.

"Wow!" he had exclaimed. "This is magnificent! Whose is it?"

"Mine," Uncle Tuck had replied, "and everything in it has been fully paid for."

He had shaken his head in disbelief. "How? What happened? I'm just speechless!"

"I simply did a Thales."

"What's that?"

"Not what, my dear boy. Who. Don't they teach you anything at school these days? Thales was a philosopher known as one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece. He lived in Miletus about twenty-five hundred years ago. He was often ridiculed by people for his poverty and was held up as proof that philosophy was useless because philosophers never made money.

"Thales was knowledgeable about astronomy and the elements, among other things, and he concluded that there would be a great harvest of olives the following year. He decided to show the townspeople that philosophers could also make money, if they were minded to use their knowledge for gain. So, in the heart of winter, when no one had any use for olive presses, he went about the district buying up options for their use the following year. Their owners were only too glad to have their incomes assured when no one knew what the next harvest would be like.

"The following year, the great harvest materialised as Thales had predicted. But when the townspeople wanted to hire presses for their olives, they found that Thales had an absolute monopoly. He could charge whatever he chose and he made a great profit as a result. Having thus made his point, he went back to philosophy.

"Well, what Thales did with olives I did in a more modest way with futures in robusta coffee and Brent crude, using my share of the money from the old

house as margin. Now I too can go back to my journalism, to reporting on the inanities of our world."

With that, Uncle Tuck had handed over a cheque, adding: "I heard that your father put his share of the money into mutual funds and has taken a terrible beating. So he may not have enough set aside to send you to university. This should see you through, so make the most of it."

The gift had left him speechless for it had been so unexpected. Up to that point he had not even dared to broach that subject with his father because he knew that the family circumstances were shaky. All he could do to show his gratitude was to hug his uncle with all his might.

Several months later, after he had entered university, Uncle Tuck had treated him to another surprise. One evening, after dinner, Uncle Tuck had said: "You are now coming into manhood. You have to get acquainted with a man's world."

He was to discover that Uncle Tuck's notion of a man's world was an extravagant house of pleasure run by Madam Sen, a plump, engaging woman who looked more like a society hostess than the keeper of a bordello. In spite of the urgings of Uncle Tuck and Madam Sen he had been much too embarrassed and nervous to select any of the delectable young ladies presented. In the end Uncle Tuck made the selection and he spent the evening with a warm and friendly girl named Little Flower. She had a fetching smile and an exquisite figure and she left him with one of those memories that could never thereafter be erased.

He had relived that evening over and over again in the weeks that followed, so much so that he became convinced he was in love. He could not concentrate on his studies and whenever he could squeeze enough money out of his budget he went back to Madam Sen's establishment to look for Little Flower. Those intermittent assignations lasted more than a year until one day he found to his dismay that Little Flower had left to get married. He had been so crushed by the news that he thought he could never love anyone again. And then Adelaide came into his life.

Adelaide was a year his junior at university. Whereas he was studying mathematics and accounting, Adelaide was studying English literature, the popular choice for modish girls from respectable families. They had met at some campus function during his final year and he had taken a fancy to her right away because she had reminded him of Little Flower. She had a similar figure and her slightly husky voice endowed her with a sensual and exciting quality. He had been so pleased with his new acquaintance that he wanted to show her off to Uncle Tuck.

They all met for coffee one afternoon. Adelaide and Uncle Tuck hit it off immediately. But as he listened to them discussing existentialism, D. H. Lawrence and John Donne, he began to realise how woefully ill-prepared he was to court a girl like Adelaide. It was something that happened after leaving the coffee

house, however, that had caused Adelaide to brim over with admiration for Uncle Tuck.

They were crossing the road at a zebra crossing when a lorry came hurtling towards them with its horn blaring. It was obvious that at its wheel was one of those bullies who behaved as if he owned the road. Whilst he and Adelaide dashed out of harm's way, Uncle Tuck stood his ground and even turned to face the on-coming lorry. The lorry was thus forced to screech to a halt before the zebra crossing. The driver glared angrily at Uncle Tuck but his uncle just gave the driver a cheery wave and calmly completed his crossing.

"Gosh, uncle, that was a crazy thing to do! What if the lorry had failed to stop?"

Uncle Tuck had shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Once in a while a person must stand up for his rights. Otherwise, before he even realises it, they will be lost," he replied.

"But you could have been killed!"

"Well, death is but part of the Great Cycle of Life. If I had been killed, I would only be dead but that maniac would have been in endless trouble. He would have had a mountain of forms to fill and endless statements to make to the police. His insurance premium would go up and he would earn demerits for dangerous driving, failing to stop at a zebra crossing, manslaughter and probably a dozen other crimes. He would have had to attend an inquest and a trial and quite possibly end up in prison. His whole life would be a mess!"

With that they parted company, laughing uproariously. Later, Adelaide said: "Your uncle is fantastic. I wish more people could live their lives like him."

Thereafter the three of them met regularly and Adelaide would hang on to Uncle Tuck's every word, especially when the conversation turned to discussions about the nature of love. As they debated whether love was fleeting or constant, spontaneous or nurtured, binding or liberating, An-Shan felt completely out of his depth. Adelaide and Uncle Tuck, in support of their respective propositions, would make references to Abelard and Heloise, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the parents of Bertrand Russell and a host of poets and writers. He had scarcely heard of some of them, let alone anything about their relevance to the arguments. He did try to read up on them but it was a losing battle. Too many new names kept cropping up and he could hardly relate what he had read to what was being discussed. Even if he could, what hope had he of matching Uncle Tuck's erudition and mesmerising delivery?

During one of those discussions, Uncle Tuck had declared: "All sorts of people think they know about love, but most haven't the foggiest idea. They can only equate love with possession, whereas love really has to do with giving, with giving everything there is to give. But most important of all, a person has very little to give

until he has learnt to love himself. If he is a sad sack or thinks himself unloveable, where is he going to find any love to give?"

That question had stuck in his mind and had worried him. It worried him still because all his life he had found it difficult to love himself. He hated his own lack of manliness, his poor physical appearance, his timidity and his utter ignorance of all those facets of life that made his uncle such a sparkling companion. But how ironic it was that an athletic and urbane man like his uncle should have died at the prime of life whereas a frail and unattractive creature like himself should be still alive!

Their regular meetings lasted for some years, until well after he had started work as an accountant and Adelaide had finished a postgraduate degree and had taken up a lecturership in English at the university. Their discussions always seemed to swirl around great abstractions and never touched upon the realities of his own existence, like audit queries, write-offs and tax restructuring. So he felt increasingly left out of things.

Then, suddenly, during one of those meetings, Uncle Tuck had announced he was retiring from journalism. He should have suspected then that something was amiss, especially when his uncle had to call off one or two of their regular meetings at the last moment because he was feeling unwell. But he thought that his uncle, with his independent means, simply wanted to take life easy.

Shortly thereafter, he was shocked to discover that Adelaide had moved into Uncle Tuck's penthouse. He felt utterly betrayed, though there had never been anything serious or understood between Adelaide and himself. He had never so much as held her hand, though they had gone out to art movies and exhibitions occasionally. He had merely loved her in secret, imagining that he could some day win her as his very own.

Although both Uncle Tuck and Adelaide wanted to continue their get-togethers, he had shown his outrage by immediately making excuses. Uncle Tuck rang him on many occasions and he relented once or twice. But he could not bear their obvious glow of happiness. So he soon stopped accepting further invitations.

It was only some time later that he felt the full impact of what the loss of their company meant. Cutting himself off from them was like doing away with everything that was vital in life. He no longer experienced the excitement of sudden laughter and the pleasurable thrill of unexpected happenings. He was left to experience to the full the sapping emptiness of his bachelor's existence. He saw it for the first time in its stark reality, the long hours of poring over figures in the office and the drudgery of dirty linen and unwashed dishes awaiting him at home. There were no more fancy dinners in convivial company to relieve the monotony of meals disinterred from tins or from the bowels of the freezer. There remained only the

weekly visits to his parents to break the monotony. But they were more an imposition than a relief, for his mother fussed over him excessively and his father had long ceased to have anything to say to him.

The prospect of an eternity of such existence suddenly made An-Shan shudder with cold. He turned up the collar of his overcoat instinctively. It had been just as cold when Adelaide rang him that evening to inform him of Uncle Tuck's death and it had been cold too when he attended the funeral the previous week.

He would never see the likes of such a funeral again, he thought. It was just as well that his father had refused to attend. To all intents and purposes it had been a carnival rather than a funeral. There was a jazz band playing his uncle's favourite tunes and the congregation around the graveside showed neither surprise at the proceedings nor the conventional expressions of mourners. They talked among themselves casually, without any of the hushed solicitude and conspicuous sadness that usually coloured such occasions.

They comprised the most unlikely collection of people he had ever seen. Apart from former newspaper colleagues, there were well-known figures in commerce and politics, an entourage of saffron-robed monks, a number of writers and artists, Madam Sen and some of her girls, some neighbourhood trades people and hawkers patronized by his uncle, one or two stockbrokers, some consular officials, and a motley collection of bartenders, acupuncturists, bone-setters, private detectives and seedy characters whose livelihoods could not be readily identified. He never realised that his uncle had such a catholic circle of friends. He could only speculate on how his uncle might have touched their lives.

Of course, there was also Adelaide, who must have arranged everything. She looked radiant and had greeted him with the warmest of smiles. He had a suspicion, however, that beneath her cheerful pose there lurked an unfathomable grief.

They all stood around a great gaping hole twice the size of the normal grave. Next to the hole a large glass half-dome did service as a coffin. He had been taken aback to see his uncle's body resting inside the half-dome, the base of which was covered by a layer of artificial grass. His uncle's body was dressed in a red and black checkered shirt and a pair of fashionable jeans. His hands were clasped behind his head and his legs were crossed at the ankles. He appeared as if he had merely fallen asleep in a meadow on a summer's day.

"Doesn't he look peaceful?" Adelaide remarked in her low husky voice, as they stood beside the glass dome. The sound of her voice after such a long interval stirred anew his longing for her. "He had wanted it this way. He missed you very much. He has left me his books but everything else goes to you," she added.

Upon hearing that, all the love he had kept in check out of pettiness and jealousy suddenly welled up in him. He fell on his knees, clasped the dome with outstretched arms and wept bitterly and unashamedly.

"Don't cry." Adelaide said as she pulled him gently to his feet and handed him a handkerchief. "He wants us to be happy and not to make such a serious thing of death."

The unexpected fragrance of her person contained in the folds of the handkerchief helped to pull him together, like a quick whiff of smelling salts. It served to remind him she was behaving much more bravely than he was.

The funeral oration was not delivered by any religious personage but by a balding bartender by the name of Szeto, whom Adelaide said was his uncle's special friend. He did it magnificently, dwelling upon his uncle's love of life and his deep friendships. He then went on to recount anecdotes about his uncle he had never heard before.

Recalling that day, An-Shan suddenly realised that tears were rolling down his cheeks. He stopped, took off his glasses and wiped them away with his hand. He regretted having taken everything Uncle Tuck had offered for granted, without trying to understand the man and the wellspring of his love. He could have learnt so much from him, sharing with him the exciting visions opened up through fresh windows to life. Now he had lost the chance.

Then, suddenly, a thought hit him with devastating force. He recalled Adelaide saying that his uncle wanted them to be happy. That meant Adelaide and himself! Was there a hidden message there? From his earliest childhood Uncle Tuck had prepared everything for him. He had understood his weaknesses and his needs. Could it be that he had also understood his helpless longing for Adelaide and had, out of unstinting love, spent the final months of his life preparing her for him?

With that searing thought he quickened his steps toward the Imperial Hotel.

Uncle Tuck first appeared in a collection of short stories published by **Asia 2000** in Hong Kong in 1990.