

BON-WAI CHOU

Being Sylvia

She was seventeen when I met her, the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. There was nothing to suggest there was anything wrong with her. She told me she was writing a novel and there was no reason not to believe her. Granted, it was not often that anyone of her background wrote fiction. She came from a very traditional Chinese family of doctors and specialists who'd been in Australia for three generations. I didn't doubt she would succeed in writing this book or any book.

To this day, many still don't believe what happened. No one in the literary establishment has been prepared to stick their neck out, so I've decided to record what I know. I feel strongly there should be at least one written account of this affair before memory fades and time distorts these extraordinary events.

Sylvia Mee Lee was a first year university student when she began attending my history lectures. She was quiet and polite and wasn't much interested in the contemporary world. I was fascinated with her and took the opportunity to talk to her when we ran into each other. She was magnetic in some way. While the others in her year were getting stoned or getting laid, Sylvia was thinking about the problems of the universe and the purpose of life. She was interested in synchronicity and intuition and the manifestation of our visions. She believed that nothing happened by chance and everyone met for a reason. "I know everything looks random," she would explain, "but there's a pattern buried underneath the chaos. We live in a world of law and order. When you're ready to move forward, some sign—like flashes, numbers or coincidences—will guide you to a higher level of consciousness or warn you of impending danger."

This sounded terribly weird and out there and I was unconvinced by her talk of hidden messages and transcendental magic. I can't recall exactly when I started to think perhaps Sylvia wasn't so crazy after all and that perhaps we are all part of an underlying plan. Perhaps I was destined to meet Sylvia.

One early spring day in 1987, the sun decided to come out to impress as we were strolling through the university south lawns to the cafeteria. Sylvia began talking about the book she was writing and the lack of support from her parents. "They sent me to the best schools so I could get a well-paying job. Writing fiction is just about the last thing they want me to do."

"Well, making a living by writing is risky."

"But my gut tells me I must do it. If I pull it off, it's destined to become a work of social, cultural and literary significance. I'm not bragging," she added, thrusting her hands in her pockets. "My intuition doesn't lie."

In my years as a university lecturer, maybe half my students have attempted to write a book but few have followed through and far fewer have succeeded in publishing anything, let alone something commercially viable. Sylvia was ambitious but I could see it was no childish fantasy. Something in her eyes told me the power of her desire was genuine. She had made up her mind to write a book and her pitch was infectious. It was a story of a large, proud Chinese family with roots going back to the 1870s gold rush in far North Queensland. There was a

tyrannical matriarch manipulating via jealousy and rivalry among her ten sons, and secrets, revenge and madness were all-consuming obsessions among their wives.

I yielded to the spell of Sylvia's ideas. They were alive and interesting and the plot had all the ingredients of a good page-turner. What's more, she was going to make history writing the first Australian-Chinese novel of significance. Every few weeks I would seek more information from her but she seemed offended by my questions.

"It's much more than a family drama," she said. "It's about the great universal truths and revelation of the underlying Tao."

I had no idea what she meant by the Tao and Sylvia gave me no further details. Over the course of the year her reticence only made me more curious. Yet I knew the writing was not going as well as she had hoped. She looked preoccupied, was late for lectures and her work wasn't as good as she was capable of. I thought she might be trying too hard and it was affecting her health. She was a great reader and had devoured all the classics: Chekhov, Flaubert, Maupassant, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Scott Fitzgerald. There was no reason why Sylvia couldn't write a novel yet I felt a weight on me whenever I thought about it. I was troubled by something about the project. It had nothing to do with her motivation. I sensed that something was bothering her, standing in the way of her success.

One day I met Sylvia in the corridor of Old Arts and stopped to see how the book was progressing.

"Have you considered the possibility that what you think is more important than what you do?" I said.

Sylvia shook her head.

"It's a concept espoused by nineteenth century philosopher James Allen. He says a person is literally what they think. You attract those conditions which reveal your thoughts."

"What exactly are you driving at?"

"Well, you want your book to be a bestseller, don't you? Then choose only the thoughts that'll build your world. Weed out any anxieties and fears. Tell yourself you can do it. And you will."

Sylvia frowned. The more I explained how confidence and constructive thinking would help bring her vision to life, the more she remained silent, her eyes fixed on the ground. I was surprised because not so long ago she was convinced that every truth was connected. I wondered what dark thoughts had invaded her mind.

I saw less of Sylvia in the final years before she graduated, partly because I became involved with a woman. We were doing so much together, there was little time to spare. I'd always meant to catch up with her again but one thing or another always got in the way. One afternoon I was waiting to meet a friend in Carlton when I saw Sylvia walk out of Readings bookshop. She looked as pretty as ever, barely a day older. I said hello and she stopped to chat. She told me she was living in a share house in Brunswick. The place was shabby, with an outdoor toilet and no heating but they had three chooks, fresh eggs and a lovely lemon tree.

"Well, my book is nearly finished," she said, "but my mother's on the verge of disowning me. She keeps telling me I'm crazy. 'You're *impossible!* It'll *never* work. I'm warning you, Sylvie, every time I do the *I Ching* I get the blocking hexagram. Your father's *furious* you didn't do medicine.'"

I told Sylvia I was thrilled for her. She was following her heart and doing what she was meant to do. Still, she looked dubious. Though she had been working continuously on

her book for years, she clearly had trouble picturing herself as a published author. Something was diluting her confidence. Even if she became a success, I wondered if she would still feel a failure because she was not doing what her parents wanted. I remembered how her face had shone the day she told me she was writing a book. She had seemed possessed, pulled by some greater power. I admired her courage for leaving the well-trodden path but now there was an indefinable change.

“I wonder if I’ll find a publisher,” she said, frowning.

I told her to have faith. “Believe in yourself. Stop this negative self-talk. We’re all waiting for your story to be told.” She assured me I wouldn’t be disappointed but I wasn’t so sure.

The next time we crossed paths was about three years later. I was at Sydney Airport on my way to a conference when I found myself beside Sylvia as we waited for our coffees. She was very smartly dressed but I noticed dark rings under her eyes. She had been working in Parliament House in Canberra for a minister and had been travelling all over the country meeting constituents. Her mother was delighted she had finally got herself a proper job and her father was impressed she was the first person from the Melbourne office to be given a mobile phone. I wasn’t surprised that Sylvia was doing well in her career. Her talent and capacity for hard work I had always known. She was bright, enthusiastic and responsible so I could see why the minister and his chief of staff had employed her.

She said she was tired. Everyone wanted a slice of the minister’s time. With her mobile phone going 24/7, endless meetings, long days and gruelling paperwork, she had run herself into the ground. The doctor had ordered her to rest but there was too much to do. “And of course,” she added, “I’m still working on my book.”

“I thought you’d finished it?”

She avoided my eyes. “Well, I’m on my third draft thanks to the latest reader’s report. My publisher says there’s still work to do.” The publisher she mentioned was one of the biggest in the world.

“Wow,” I said, impressed.

“Yes, I’m very lucky they’ve taken an interest in me. It’s all because of this woman I met...” She hesitated, then fell silent.

“A woman?” I pressed.

She looked up as if surprised by my voice. “Oh, it was weird.”

This is what Sylvia then told me.

On the night of 11 June 1996, feeling too tired to cook, she went down the road for a meal. As she entered the row of shops a chill wind blew around her. No sooner had she wound her scarf round her neck than a sharp peal of bells and a flash of light made her jump. She turned and caught sight of a woman with a waxy complexion staring at her through the florist window. She was middle-aged, tall, very prim and dressed neatly in a long black skirt with an apron around her. Though she looked proper she had an air of indecency about her and there was a dirty red stain in the middle of her apron. The woman kept looking at her and as she entered the small restaurant next door it struck her that the woman must be the new owner. She’ll change the whole shop, she thought, when everything is perfect the way it is. Sylvia loved the flowers in rustic baskets, the earthy, homely, bygone atmosphere. Over dinner, Sylvia brooded. She’d never been comfortable with change and by the time she went to pay she was feeling quite depressed.

“The man sitting next to you with the flower pinned to his lapel has already paid for your meal,” said the person behind the counter. “You were so deep in thought he said not to tell you.”

Well, that was strange. What could it mean? Had the universe left her a message? Sylvia was so startled by what had happened she raced back to the florist, forgetting her gloom. She caught up with the woman just as she was locking up.

“Oh,” said the woman in a low voice, seeing Sylvia arriving, breathless. “I’m glad you came back. I wanted to speak with you.”

Despite Sylvia’s earlier misgivings, the woman was very pleasant and when she smiled Sylvia wondered why she ever had doubts about her.

“You’re a writer, aren’t you?” she said. “I suppose I don’t need to tell you writing isn’t an easy choice. But the rewards are great if you succeed.”

Sylvia looked at the fine wrinkles round the woman’s eyes then she caught sight of her hands. They looked exceptionally young, soft and smooth as a baby’s. Something about the unblemished hands drew Sylvia nearer to the stranger and, quite unconscious of what she was doing, she began telling the woman how she often became discouraged, as writing was such a lonely task. Many a time she longed for comfort and consolation. “Well, you need feedback,” said the woman. “I have just the contact for you. She works in one of the big publishing houses and she’s always looking for new authors.”

The woman disappeared to the back of the shop and came back with a slip of paper with contact details.

Sylvia couldn’t believe her luck. What serendipity! But that night as she lay in bed she felt unsure. The prospect of writing to a major publishing firm filled her with fear. Something held her back. She supposed it was a lack of confidence. Deep down she felt undeserving. She couldn’t sleep and couldn’t think. Towards the early morning she woke to strong winds beating against the windows but she no longer felt any dread. She sprang up, and typed a letter.

“I didn’t expect to hear from them,” Sylvia continued. “But to my surprise, they provided an extremely encouraging reader’s report on my manuscript. They told me I have a unique voice—a mixture of formal English and colloquial American (which I never knew)—and said there was evidence of well-developed writing skill.”

“Well, that’s great news,” I said but Sylvia shook her head.

“They also told me to rewrite the whole manuscript.”

“What?”

“I needed to dig deeper. The imagination needs to be made more rigorous. Really, I don’t mind rewriting,” she added, looking wretched. “I’m used to obstacles. I’ve faced many difficulties in my life but sometimes I feel ... I don’t have all the tools within me for success.” I thought I saw tears gleaming in her eyes. Then, unexpectedly, she changed the subject and added, “... and ah ... oh, yes ... they said the story had wide commercial appeal and there’s definitely a market for it.”

“So they’re going to publish it?” I asked.

“Well, they told me to send the revised version back to them.”

I nodded.

“Did you go back and see the woman in the florist?”

“I did try to find her. I wanted to thank her but no one in the shop seemed to know anything about her.”

That struck me as peculiar. “What do you mean?”

“I gave them a description of the woman, the date and time we met and everything—but everyone I spoke with was adamant no one like that had ever worked there. But I have a feeling I will see her again because the moment we locked eyes, I had a kind of premonition ... I knew it wasn’t a random experience.”

I pressed her for more details. How could someone disappear like that? When I asked Sylvia if she’d tried to get more information from the contact at the publisher, I couldn’t catch her reply over a flight announcement. The next moment she had dashed off to her boarding gate.

I consider myself the rational, scientific sort and had always found the mystic and the supernatural unconvincing so the idea that someone could appear out of the blue and give you just the message you need freaked me. Could this woman have been a ghost? For the first time I couldn’t discount the possibility that there was a greater power directing our lives, mine included. It was disturbing.

For weeks I felt nervous without knowing why. I didn’t like the idea that I was part of a larger, predetermined plan. I tried to put it out of my mind and resisted any intuitive messages that came to me. I wanted to be in control. I planned my life more consciously and thought Sylvia brave to believe what she couldn’t see.

On the surface, nothing had changed, but I felt different. I had to keep moving, do more, know more, be more. Three months later, I got married to my long-term girlfriend. After the wedding, we had a honeymoon combined with my sabbatical. We travelled extensively, staying in many charming villages in France and Italy. We did the rounds of museums and palaces and cruised the islands. On one of the cruises we encountered Sylvia’s parents who were holidaying in Europe. To our astonishment, we discovered my wife had connections with Sylvia’s family. Her parents had bought a house from Sylvia’s parents and her uncle worked in the same clinic as Sylvia’s father. My wife also shared the same birthday as Sylvia’s mother and her older brother was the personal trainer to one of Sylvia’s best friends from school. The connections were uncanny.

“Coincidence is the hand of God,” said my wife, smiling. I could find no response. I understood nothing.

“Tao’s underlying Oneness,” said Sylvia’s mother. “We’re all inseparably connected with everything else by invisible links.” Having made her point, she turned away from me. Throughout the cruise she seemed to be in a good mood but I couldn’t help recalling her antagonistic attitude toward Sylvia’s literary pursuits.

In the summer of 2002 my wife and I returned to Melbourne. I was lucky enough to be promoted soon after my return to my old department but things had changed. In the twelve months we were away, there was a new head who was focused on IT, statistics, the bottom line and key performance indicators. Mobile phones were everywhere, as were flat screen TVs. Online banking was the new norm and I soon realised I had to change with the times or I’d perish. With Christmas coming up, I was doing some last minute shopping in the CBD. The department stores were stocked with all sorts of gadgets but the Block Arcade looked as beautiful and elegant as ever. I wandered through its mosaic corridors when an old student of mine, Nicole Bridgewater, came out of Haigh’s Chocolates. I hadn’t seen her in years. We stopped to talk. Or, rather, she talked. I learned she had run into Sylvia several months ago.

“She’s given up that high flying job in Parliament House. Back to living on the smell of an oily rag. Still writing that book. God knows what it’s about. I mean, she must have

rewritten it hundreds of times. I'd no idea it would be so difficult to get published. Thousands of books get published every year. Beats me why she's taking so long. Can't believe she's thrown away \$80,000 a year to write this thing that never gets finished!"

I stood in silence. Was there no great genius without some touch of madness? Sylvia was honouring her deep purpose and I felt proud of her. She had kept her word. Years earlier, she'd told me she would stay up half the night working on a paragraph till she had the result she wanted. Inevitably, she would scratch out half of it. And she'd do the same again and again, night after night, chasing perfection and her inner God.

"I have to say I'm worried about Sylvia. She's become a kind of recluse. She doesn't seem to have any interest outside of that damned manuscript of hers. Rarely reads the newspaper, watches TV or takes a holiday. Hardly even walks outside. It's like she's under hypnosis. I said to her, 'Don't you think you should get out of your head a bit? After all, writing is a business and you need to know what your rivals are up to. Didn't Stephen King say writing's one of the most competitive businesses? Or was it Hemingway?' Honestly, she just looked appalled when I suggested she read books by contemporary authors and surf the net to see what ideas are scattered around. D'you think she could be suffering from some type of neurosis or complex? Or she's on the verge of a breakdown?"

I didn't want to hear any more. I was on Sylvia's side but why in God's name had she shut herself up like that? No doubt she was working hard and she had her troubles but what was going on in her mind? I shuddered at the thought of Sylvia's beautiful face cobwebbed by wrinkles, her shoulders slumped, her spirit drained of energy. To have sacrificed everything for the sake of a book ... love, family, a home life ... Every time I thought of Sylvia I felt a nervous apprehension. When I went round a corner or opened a door, I could not help seeing her shadowy, disintegrating presence floating before me.

They say what you focus on you attract. When you think hard enough about something it will materialise because your every thought is a frequency that sends out a powerful magnetic signal. A strong belief can become reality. Well, one afternoon, I was in my office, thinking about this phenomenon when a curious sound in the corridor roused me. There seemed to be footsteps hurrying up and down the passageway. I opened the door and looked down the corridor. There was no one. Everything was deadly silent. I went back into my room, sure I'd heard footsteps. Some little time later, I again heard distinct steps coming towards my office. They had an ominous quality. I pulled open the door and this time, I froze.

Standing before me was Sylvia.

She looked extremely thin, years older and emptied of life.

She walked inside without looking at me, dropped into a chair and hid her face. Stamped all over her was unbearable pain and suffering. What had happened to her? I couldn't begin to fathom but she had come to me for a reason and I had to find out what it was. Yet she wouldn't look at me and didn't talk. Outside the sky was bleak. A cold, chill light flooded the room. Sylvia looked so forlorn and heartbroken I wanted to throw my arms around her. But a wall of silence surrounded her, shutting me out. When I despaired of knowing what was wrong, she began to talk. Yet she'd hardly said three words when a tall woman with a long face appeared noiselessly beside her. She was dressed neatly in black and tied around her waist was a blood-stained apron. I was startled but Sylvia seemed unaware of the woman's presence.

“She came back to me three weeks ago on 11 June,” Sylvia said. “Told me the publisher liked the music parts in my story but I would need to elaborate about the piano lessons...”

I stared at the obnoxious, unmoving spectre and felt myself shaking.

“She said one more revision and it’ll be ready for publication. But I don’t know if I have the energy. I’ve sent them at least fifty versions of the manuscript.”

I gasped, as a dryness in my throat choked me.

“You understand, don’t you? After working all these years, I’m exhausted. I’ve given it my all.”

Sylvia’s voice was weak. She looked like an old woman, exhausted by life. My heart sank at her pallor and the heavy load she carried. The woman beside her stared at me without blinking and suddenly, I went cold, as I understood at last. Monsters! Leeches! What cruelty!

I glared at the apparition with hostility. My head reeled and I tried to steady myself but something swept me down. I covered my face with my hands. I must have groaned aloud as I became aware of a voice saying: “Are you all right? Do you need a doctor? Should I get you something?”

When my equilibrium was restored I looked up to find the apparition had gone. Sylvia announced she must be leaving. “No!” I shouted. “Don’t go. I’ll be right back.” I jumped up and dashed out of the room. Blundered down the street, round the corner and plunged into the nearest bookshop. I could no longer ignore what I had already known. Sylvia had long ceased to be a pioneer of Australian Chinese literature. Other bright young writers had surpassed her and one of them had already sold tens of thousands of copies of her debut work, *The Conjuror*. I grabbed a copy from the stand near the door and paid for it at the counter.

You must have heard of Nancy King. She’s given hundreds of radio interviews and appeared on *Tonight Live*. She conducts sold out writing classes, writes a column for the leading national newspaper, has tens of thousands following her on social media and gets invited to every writers’ festival. Yet I hadn’t bothered to finish a single book by Nancy King. None of her books had appealed to me. Something wasn’t right about them. I couldn’t explain why but something seemed missing.

“You must have heard of her,” I repeated to Sylvia when I returned to my office, panting and out of breath. “She’s all the rage.” No, said Sylvia, she hadn’t heard of her, though she had heard about a young writer with an amazing double career as barrister and author. That profile alone made the name well known.

“I want you to read it,” I said, handing her a copy of *The Conjuror*. “Nancy King’s your rival. You need to know what she’s up to. This habit of yours to rewrite, reassess, re-evaluate and eliminate every fault has got to stop. Let it go! Give yourself a break! Stop going round in circles. Get out of the prison of your doubts and fears. Stop expecting the worst! You don’t lack ability or hard work but you *do* lack heart. You can’t succeed at anything if you have a defeatist attitude. You have to believe in yourself. Have faith in your abilities! Your spirit is stronger than your circumstances. Draw on your inner powers! They’ll work magic for you ...”

Sylvia kept saying she couldn’t do it. She burst into tears and sobbed as if her heart would break. I hadn’t seen anyone cry so hard since my mother died when I was a little boy.

“Come on. I’m taking you home.”

“I’m not sick,” she objected, as I led her downstairs. “*I’m not sick.*”

“All right, you’re not sick. But please, no more arguing. I’m taking you home.”

Sylvia pulled heavily on my arm and every step down was painful for her.

The blood-curdling scream shot through the darkness. Someone was being strangled. In a rush of terror, I sat up, shaking. My neck was covered in sweat. It was two in the morning but my mind was astonishingly clear. I followed the direction of the sound and felt a chill down my spine.

Aaaarrh-Aaaarrh... Aaaarrh-Aaaarrh... Aaaarrh-Aaaarrh.

It took a few disturbed moments before it dawned on me the telephone was ringing.

I couldn't imagine who could be calling at this time of night, unless it was my wife. She was overseas visiting relatives with our son. I jumped out of bed and grabbed the telephone.

"*They killed my baby!* Three women in the car and the toilet paper—"

"What?"

"*I wrote that scene! They stole my baby. I knew it when I got to page 131—*"

"What are you talking about?"

"*I poured my life and soul into that book and they mutilated her ...*"

In a flash of understanding I understood that Sylvia was talking about her manuscript.

"Are you saying someone plagiarised—"

"They stole the whole thing! Characters, plot, themes, symbols..."

"Who did?"

"*The Conjuror*, of course. That's *my* story! There're *hundreds of similarities.*"

It was hard to wrap my head around what I was hearing. It couldn't be true and yet, the revelation wasn't completely shocking. Hadn't I half expected it? Hadn't I known all along? I tried to work out what could have happened. Why was it, in all these years, no one had noticed that *The Conjuror* was a hoax? Then it leaped at me, all those too-good-to-be-true reader's reports, the effusive letters asking her to "send us more."

I was furious but this must be nothing compared to the effects of this discovery on poor Sylvia. Stay calm, I told myself. Keep listening. Sylvia needs you to let it all out. Let her pour it all out.

And pour it out she did. I listened to burning anger, resentment, frustration, humiliation and bitterness.

"You don't expect this behaviour in the arts," said my wife when I told her what had happened. "One would've thought writers of all people—"

"Why of all people?" I countered.

"Well, creative people—"

"Just because they do art doesn't mean there aren't rogues and bastards in every profession." I felt awful for snapping at my wife but I wanted desperately to do something for Sylvia. She'd suffered a total breakdown and was shut up in a hospital.

"It's the shock," said the nurse. "She won't stop raving."

When I visited her she was lying in bed by the window repeating, "I wrote it in 1996. Grandmother eating fish, counting money with her abacus, gesticulating wildly. Can you believe *she* also had a grandmother eating fish, counting money and gesticulating wildly? I had Danish butter cookie tins and *she* had Danish butter cookie tins! My protagonist had to choose between her mother and father and *her* protagonist had to choose between her mother

and father! I had a discussion about names and *she* had a discussion about names! I mentioned the meaning of red, white and the number four and *she* mentioned red, white and the number four! *Oh, the blatant similarities ...*”

I worried she would never be all right again.

“She can’t distinguish between what’s real and what’s not,” said the nurse.

“I can,” said Sylvia, turning to me with a smile. “My dreams are real—more real and beautiful than anything I see. Please draw the curtains. I don’t like people watching me.”

“Sylvia was at least twenty years ahead of her time. Her manuscript was finished long before Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and all that jazz but they still attributed her work to a Gen Y author. And it was easy to see why because her concepts were timeless, ever-adaptable ...”

Nicole Bridgewater was overflowing like a fountain. Once again synchronicity had played a hand in bringing her to me. I’ve come to accept that Nicole is an indelible pattern in my universe, a piece of the puzzle as real and inevitable as Christmas, Sylvia, my wife, and all the other things intimately bound together in my life. Twenty years ago I wasn’t positive about the law of attraction but today I’m convinced that the power of the mind is the Way and anything that manifests in the universe, both negative and positive, emerges from our thoughts. For what we repeat often enough in our thoughts does come true.

So it wasn’t surprising that on the day I’d lunched with a professor at the Florentino Grill over which we discussed films and Fellini that I got thinking about Sylvia. As I turned down Bourke Street I found myself entering the Hill of Content bookshop. I didn’t know why. I had books galore at home waiting to be read but something led me up the old carpeted staircase to the cosy reading area. My thought was to sit down quietly in one of those comfy leather couches and meditate for a while but at the top of the stairs, who did I see but Nicole Bridgewater, weighed down with books and bursting with news.

“You wouldn’t believe this but when Sylvia was in hospital someone gave her a book about a pianist, thinking it would soothe her. She’d hardly read three pages when she recognised large chunks of her manuscript in that book as well! It was by a different author to *The Conjuror*. Another award-winning book, mind you. So how did Sylvia’s work get into that book as well? The connection was the publisher.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Wait. There’s more! The publisher, having received various versions of Sylvia’s manuscripts—written so true to life, mind you—must have seen their value. She appropriated the Australian Chinese parts into one book and the music parts into another book. Terrible what she did but so clever of her to turn Sylvia’s manuscript into two lucrative memoirs. This publisher has also conveniently left publishing to become agent to the two so-called memoirists.”

“But this is ridiculous,” I said. “Sylvia wrote fiction. How could they make other people’s memoirs so closely resemble Sylvia’s fiction? Surely on that point alone Sylvia would win her case.”

Nicole dropped her voice. “It isn’t so easy. The author of the music book has a well-connected parent, a darling of the literary world. And Nancy King, as you know, has a high profile in the media. She’s a national brand. Compared to them, Sylvia’s a nobody. Who would believe her?”

“Did she contact an intellectual property lawyer?”

“Oh, she’s done that. She had a lawyer write a letter demanding the publisher explain the 300 similarities found in *The Conjuror* and in Sylvia’s manuscripts. The publisher ignored the letter of demand and Sylvia was told that if she wanted to pursue the matter it would cost her around \$400,000.”

“What?”

“Oh, yes. She would need big money to lodge four separate court cases. One against the publisher, one against the agent and one against each of the authors.”

“That’s absurd!”

“And there’s no guarantee of success. Even if she won, she would still be out of pocket.”

The whole scenario was ludicrous. My impulse was to kick and slam, to hit out. After all these years Sylvia had come away with nothing. No career. No publication. No family. She’d become a mere shell of what she used to be. Surely she deserved some acknowledgement. “If they liked Sylvia’s story so much why didn’t they publish her work?” I asked.

“She’s too hard to market. Hasn’t got the killer instinct. She’s not sold on herself. People want a winner. They want a gritty story of someone who began with nothing, not a ray of hope but thought big, was defeated in a hundred different ways but never gave up. People don’t have time for a loser—”

I couldn’t let it go. “Why doesn’t Sylvia just out them on the internet?”

“Defamation.” Nicole continued with resolution. “The publisher would take her to the cleaners. Drag the case out in court for years. They’d get all the highbrow writers in their stable to rally behind them. Sylvia hasn’t got a hope in hell. And it would mean the end of her writing career.”

I spent several seconds looking at Nicole’s plump, placid face and felt a sense of disgust at her acceptance.

“But d’you know what?” she continued, after an interval of silence. “Awful as it is, I think this has been the best thing for Sylvia.”

I looked at her with disbelief.

“If this hadn’t happened,” Nicole went on, “she would never have stopped writing that darn manuscript which was doomed from the start. I say this came at the perfect time to wake her up so she can move on to the next chapter—which is so much better.”

“What next chapter?”

Nicole smiled.

“I knew you’d be surprised. Sylvia met her husband in one of the law firms. Oh, he’s a lovely man. I swear ten years have dropped from her face. You won’t know her. She’s wonderfully happy. They’re moving to the south of France to start a family.”

Nicole talked on for a while but I stopped listening. A lump rose in my throat. It seemed impossible. Sylvia in love, married?

“She’s wonderfully happy,” Nicole repeated. “What’s more, she’s doing the kind of work I’d say God has called her to do and what the world needs right now.”

I was puzzled.

“She’s writing fables and fairy tales and self-publishing. Can you believe that? She’s already got 30,000 pre-orders.”

I had to sit down.

“Are you all right?”

So Sylvia had finally reconnected with her soul's great calling, reclaiming what she knew to be true all along.

"Talk about the universe working in mysterious ways," said Nicole, and laughed aloud.

"She asked for it," I murmured.

"Asked for it?"

I smiled. "*We think in secret, and it comes to pass—Our world is but our looking glass ...*"

As you think, you shall become.