

## Part One

He wears cashmere sweaters on cool rainy nights and linen suits under the blazing sun. He has a skinny Indian servant, a shiny Mercedes Benz and a chauffeur to drive him through the forests from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh. He flies alone from airport to airport across the China Sea, sleeping and dreaming, travelling along the Malaysian peninsula between his tin mines and rubber plantations. He is silent in his dark suit, his briefcase at his side, and no one knows he daydreams of Immortals and the Jade hare. If he could have his greatest wish he would ask to live one year all over again, the most beautiful and the worst year of his life. The year of the green wood rat, an even numbered year symbolic of duality, partnerships and choice, the year to bring about completion or destruction.

His astrologer Mr Tong Hin Chee had warned him:

'Be on your guard. Be afraid. You were born in the year of the white metal tiger and this is the beginning of the 79<sup>th</sup> cycle of Cathay.'

He remembers everything that happened that year, and he can still hear her laugh like an out of tune guitar. They'd driven for miles through fields as yellow as her hair and found Hoi Fat in a hotel room. Behind the dirt grey curtain in a rusty bathtub, a jail guard suit and a gun. There was an old stained mattress sunk in a lake and a mad girl in prison chained to the wall. He remembers the smell of death and the look of a man about to hang; his eyes wild like a lassoed horse. He's forgotten nothing.

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1984. A Mercedes raced through the plantations and jungles; shades of dark dense green shining leaves, scents of tobacco smoke and leather. The driver's thick neck, his saffron brown hands on the wheel. The girl with yellow hair and the rich Chinese man sitting beside her.

She watched the Malay villages whiz past; stalls strung with plantains, piles of spiny bulging durian cut open like tumours, pyramids of hairy rambutan as pink and red as sea anemones, huts built with wood and woven leaves, the women stood on the roadsides in patterned sarongs their black hair in fat buns.

'I want to live in a house on stilts in the middle of the jungle,' she said, 'and I want a monkey.'

'You don't want to live in those huts,' he told her, 'they're dirty and full of ants and lice. You wouldn't like it. You know nothing. I'll buy you a plantation bungalow then you can keep a monkey.'

'I don't want a goddamn bloody bungalow; I want a house on stilts. You know nothing! They're cool and fresh, and you can live in them naked. You don't need air conditioning in a thatched hut. Tell him to turn the AC off, I want to open the windows.'

The man gave the order to the driver. The windows rolled down and the hot steamy air flowed into the car. The girl waved to the kids in the road, her crinkled brow, her cherry lips, a mixture of wonder and curiosity. The kids waved back, standing in their shorts like skinny gangling spider monkeys.

‘Stop at the next stall.’ she ordered. ‘I want to buy them sweets.’

The driver burning red under his dark skin drove away slowly from the shop while the girl tossed sweets out the window. The kids galloped along side. They stuck their spindly arms through the window with open palms and she crammed them full of sweets. The kids had shining eyes and tiny bare feet.

Later when the sun had sunk and the night was black, tiny light bulbs glittered along the road, strung like fairy lights along the stall fronts. They passed through village after village. The girl was lying across the back seat, head on her plump soft lover, feet dangling out the window, her bright red shiny toenails catching the lights. She puffed hard on a fag making an orange glow in the dark, and flicked ash at the window so it blew around the car.

His name was Phang Jin Yu. He was pale and fat like a creamy white stuffed dumpling with a face as round as a moon cake. He had eyebrows like tiny swallow’s wings, a double chin and rounded sloping shoulders. His hair was so lush that when he woke up in the morning he looked like he’d worn a dozen hair rollers overnight. He always wore rumpled suits with large wide collars and a gold signet ring with a red ruby.

He was in love with this yellow haired girl named Amanda Louise; ‘Better known as Randy Mandy.’ had been her sassy reply when he’d asked her name. She was backpacking across Asia, sleeping in run down hotels, eating in street market stalls and pretending to speak Malay. She believed she knew everything. He was a rich businessman, trained lawyer and a fat lover who believed in destiny.

He’d first seen her on the seventh day of the first lunar month, in a back street Chinese market near the train station in Kuala Lumpur. Squeezed in and dwarfed by skyscrapers it was just a muddy wasteland of shacks and food stalls. The hawkers were squatting in the dirt in front of their gunny bags, there were dried pig intestines hung from shop rafters and shelves laden with glass jars stuffed with thousand-year-old eggs. All that was strange and hideous could be found there; scorpions scampering in bowls, water snakes coiled in tanks and curious vegetables overflowing from baskets and heaped on the ground.

An old Chinese man in a greying vest wheeled a barrow between the stalls, and as he walked his flip-flops slapped and squelched along through the puddles. His barrow squeaked and yapped like a rusty dog. Inside were two puppies. Sweet puppies. He stopped in front of a stall where an old toothless woman sat hidden behind a counter stacked with crates of fresh pigs’ snouts and trotters. She laughed baring her blackened gums and handed him a sack. He grabbed the puppies by their necks and shoved

them in, then tied the top.

The girl arrived; her yellow hair shimmered in the sun. She could hear the puppies howling inside the sack. The man kicked the sack and the puppies cried louder. The girl pushed the man and a crowd gathered.

The man shouted at the girl in Cantonese, 'Go away and suck your father's dick.'

She didn't understand and the crowd laughed.

The girl told the man in Malay, 'You're a stupid pig!'

He understood and the crowd jeered. They howled 'bodoh babi, bodoh babi, stupid pig' over and over.

Phang Jin Yu arrived; he stood in his crumpled grey suit, his wavy big crazy hair whipped by a breeze that scuttled through the alley stirring the cloudy white steam that billowed from the cooking pots. He coaxed the cruel pig man with his singsong Chinese. The pig man whined. Phang Jin Yu's words were soft as he paid him money and the pig man handed over the sack without looking at the girl.

After they sat together in the back seat of his Mercedes. Mandy held the puppies in her arms like sleeping babies. Phang Jin Yu was watching her face. The driver was looking at them through the mirror.

Phang Jin Yu was jealous of the puppies, he told her, 'You shouldn't hold them against you. They've probably got skin diseases.'

'No they haven't, they're only puppies.' She narrowed her eyes, 'So what are we going to do with them?'

He thought of Bin Azahar. He'd bung him some money, and they could live on the factory compound. He said, 'My manager in Ipoh, I think he might take them.'

'Think? Don't you know? Does he like dogs? Has he got a garden? I want them to be well looked after.'

'They will be.'

She sighed, 'I wish I could keep them myself. Look, look at them!'

She squeezed the puppies against her small breasts. He swallowed hard, his penis hard. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but first swipe away the puppies.

So that was how they met, she was nineteen years old and just out of school and he, Phang Jin Yu, old enough to know better. Later that night they arrived in Ipoh; he wanted to take her home but knew it was too soon, so he took her to a new five star hotel. Mandy sat in the back of the car gazing up at the concrete and glass building. The puppies were lying between them. Jin Yu watched her out of the corner of his eye, seeing her puckered lips, her hesitation.

He told her, 'They have a spa and swimming pool.'

She said, 'I don't want to stay here, it's ugly.'

'It's the best hotel.'

'I don't like it! I want to stay somewhere old with four-poster beds and verandas. Somewhere colonial.'

'Colonial?'

She went on, 'I want a room with ceiling fans and a bathroom with a huge iron bathtub and lion claw feet.'

Jin Yu thought of the Majestic station hotel with its peeling paint and shady columned verandas, the armies of ants marching along the walls, the rust in the bath tubs, the white stained tablecloths crawled by flies, and cracked leather armchairs seeped in the smell of boiled cabbage and mutton. No one he knew would ever stay there.

That first night when he made love to her she didn't want to lie down on the bed. Instead she laughed at him and ordered Malibu and ice. She drank glassfuls, turned the radio up and started dancing. She sat in an ugly fake leather swivel chair and began to spin herself, round and round, faster and faster, so fast he thought she might levitate.

He sat on the edge of the bed bedazzled. He could see her face then the back of the chair, then her face, then the chair back, face, chair back, face. Then she began pulling off her clothes and chucking them at him. Breasts, chair, breasts, chair, arse, chair, arse, chair, breasts, chair, arse, chair, breasts. He sat on the edge of the bed bewildered.

She yanked him over and pushed him down in the seat. She opened his flies and straddled him. He felt his cock slipping into her as she came down. She rode him like a horse.

'I want to spin' she shouted.

He was too heavy and the old chair creaked and slowed down. He had to keep it turning by pushing his feet against the floor and his calves burned. He kept them spinning on and on until the end.

Later watching her sleep, Jin Yu marvelled at how he'd found such a girl. She'd appeared before him in the market as a vision, sinful and corrupt, standing almost naked in her flimsy dress while brawling with the street hawker. He sensed she would be insolent and unruly and he believed he could teach her slowly.

*"Lying in the dark dusty room his gaze sweeps over her pearl white body lit by the glow from the streetlights as he lifts strands of her yellow hair and watching it blow through his fingertips by the wind from the ceiling fan knowing this is all he's ever wanted and mosquito coils burn rust red tips through smoking clouds while she sleeps in tangled sheets and he knows not to touch her now nor to push his luck when he's already had her once tonight and if he waits he knows he'll have her again."*

At dawn he crept out the room, leaving a note for girl. Jin Yu trod lightly down the creaking staircase and through the hallway, he heard a growling rasping sound from behind the reception desk. He drew closer, looking over the top he saw a skinny Chinese man with thick black brows snoring on a camp bed, his lips shining and wet. Jin Yu turned away and cut through the bar and in the murky grey light seeping through the shutters he saw a long thin figure curled up in a scuffed leather armchair; an apparition of a mythical Hsigo monkey with a broad apelike forehead and

deep glowing eyes watching from under its heavy brow.

Jin Yu wove between the tables to avoid passing in front of him. He knew who it was; this monkey creature, with his arms folded around his body like bird's wings.

'Jin Yu wait!'

Jin Yu stood still as though an invisible fishhook had caught him. He hesitated for a moment then turned round to face Hoi Fat.

'So it's you! What do you want?'

'That's very unfriendly. How about long time no see and all that? Or at least say welcome back.'

Jin Yu shrugged, 'You've been back years now.'

'I know my friend but you've never welcomed me home. Do you realise this is the first time we've met since you left for the UK? Then you came back and I went away, then I came back and years have gone by. Water under the bridge and still you won't return my calls.'

'You're drunk! It's five in the morning.'

'So what! Five in the morning, five at night, what's the difference?'

'Look, I have to go and of course welcome home!' Jin Yu turned to leave.

'Wait, wait, wait, have a drink with me, just one.'

Hoi Fat poured whisky into his empty glass and slid it across the table towards Jin Yu then he took a swig from the bottle. Jin Yu sat down slowly and pushed the drink away.

Hoi Fat sniggered, 'Look at me still here drinking from a bottle. I came here tonight with my leader to plan strategy. He left hours ago and now I find myself in reverie looking back at the past.'

'It seems to me you're drowning your self-pity in a bottle.'

'My hardships might seem of no importance to you,' he waved his hand, 'just being called Ching Chonger and Fly Lice boy for three long years in London was hardly penury. Eating instant pot noodles was a joy. My return to Malaysia was a failure, my old man was right I should have studied medicine.'

'I remember you always landed on your feet in the end.'

'Indeed, I've finally turned my life around. Only last night my leader and I dined on suet pudding and a blancmange,' he licked his lips, 'shiny white, wobbling like a fat woman's arse.' He smiled knowingly, 'You see? I now embrace the British, their marvellous cuisine and ideals of freedom and democracy.'

In the grey light Jin Yu noticed the sinful expression on his face like a wayward schoolboy. Fat was sitting just a few feet away, staring straight at him, so close he could smell his whisky breath.

With a wry laugh Jin Yu asked him, 'So is it politics now?'

'Why not?' Hoi Fat scoffed, 'I'm the new Malaysian Justice Party candidate for Tipah. Shiny teeth and a good hairstyle. Hate the rich and hate the fat. Love babies and love the poor. Numerous super powers and liquor is my fuel.'

'Well I'm sure you'll get all the votes then. Congratulations.'

'You're too dull to understand.'

Hoi Fat brandished the whiskey bottle, bringing the last dregs of liquor to his lips and drank.

He accused Jin Yu, 'All you know is how to make money from tin. You're a fat clodhopper. Listen, I Chung Hoi Fat, PhD in political science and man of the world will show you the proof. Look at these! I've had every one of them.'

He pulled a pack of Polaroid photos from his pocket, his fingers were long, his nails yellowed by nicotine. He flicked his thin wrist spreading them into a tatty fan, and waited for Jin Yu to pick one like in a card trick.

'You've been across the border to Betong,' Jin Yu sighed, 'nice Thai girls.'

'I never had to pay, they gave themselves for free.'

Jin Yu suddenly felt tired and weary. He didn't care why Hoi Fat carried a bunch of prostitute's photos around in his pocket. He thought of the girl upstairs still asleep.

He told Hoi Fat, 'You're drunk and I've got to go.'

'You can't hide from me. I'll win in Tipah, you'll see,' Hoi Fat sneered, 'then I'll show you what's what.'

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They had made an unlikely pairing right from the start. Jin Yu, so fat and rich his pores oozed honey; so tantalising his classmates had stuck close like a cloud of flies. Instead Hoi Fat, a tall and lanky half ape boy marinated in salty brine, had exuded a sour stench of dejection.

'I'll tell you who it is that wants to drink our blood!' Hoi Fat had glared at the boys huddled around him in the playground, 'Pontianaks! These are ugly women, with sharp fingernails and gold capped teeth.'

The other kids had giggled, everybody knew the ghosts of stillborn females turned into vampires.

'Shut up laughing and listen!' he'd spat on the ground, 'They attack men at night on the roadsides, and we're all in danger.'

'Our cook says you can kill them by cutting off their fingernails and stuffing them into the hole at the back of their necks.' Jin Yu had interrupted.

'Shut it tubby!' Hoi Fat barked, 'Don't ever butt in when I speak.' And he'd jabbed his bony finger into Jin Yu's soft belly.

Like love and hate they had fitted together. Such opposites were destined to unite and then fall apart, a quarrel between them blossoming as they grew older, like a flower in the deep fate line on Jin Yu's plump palm. And in the end they had their final battle, their friendship and school days were over and the time had arrived to be men.

In 1969 Jin Yu was nineteen years old; he had a bumfluff moustache and a leather jacket that was too hot to wear. Since leaving school he'd taken to driving his scooter around Ipoh with his mates. He was wasting

time, waiting to be sent away to study economics and law. Then one morning his father ordered him to go to the barber for a short back and sides and he realised the day had come. He sat in his father's study watching him read from a brochure.

'All accommodation is offered on a self-catering basis and residents have access to well equipped kitchens with ample cooking and storage facilities.' His father paused.

'I can't cook.' Jin Yu told him.

'Obviously.' He carried on reading, 'Whilst all university accommodation is offered on a self-catering basis, the university's catering department offers superb value dining options with excellent menus.'

'Maybe I could look for somewhere to rent close by.'

His father scoffed:

'Don't talk rubbish! It'll be an experience. The British system, the student life, I want you to throw yourself into it.'

Jin Yu hoped there would be some Chinese restaurants in the town.

'Sure Father.'

He observed his father who was still reading. His hair had turned grey and he appeared shrunken inside his suit. The wall behind him was crowded with old faded black and white portrait photos of his family. He stared up at his uncles, grandfather, great grandfather right back to the eldest, Chung Keng Quee who was the first ancestor to leave China.

*"Chung Keng Quee a hundred years before stands aboard a creaking groaning rotting junk and faded scarlet sails snap and whip against the wind as the hull heaves and crashes into the foaming greeny yellow sea drenching men with faces cracked in parched black lines etched with sharp metal quills as teeth rot and fall from their bloody mouths and stomachs swell tight against the skin of their yellow bellies while Chung Keng Quee stands among them his fire filled black eyes see into his future as he flies away and above the junk into the skies his tattered silk robes flapping around him like bat wings flying downwards to the emerald green and saffron brown earth of the promised land he swoops and skims over acres of opium fields of purple poppies heavy and oozing with black dreams nodding in the soft wind as junks and sampans sail back across the china sea laden with opium and thin white weasel men with watery blue eyes strike the deals as they unload the dreamy death and the Chinese men their skeletons still wrapped in waxy skin lay sweating in filth their hands like claws clutch the opium pipes while the white weasel men reload their ships with silks and brocade and fine porcelain and precious tea without the giving of silver nor gold but smoky dreams in exchange for all China's treasure and Chung Keng Quee will grow the heavy nodding poppies for the weasels and he will mine the tin and the silver from the land and the white weasels will know him as Capitan China."*

His father slammed the brochure shut and announced:

'That's it then. Han Yu will go with you; he has business in the UK next month. You'll need to buy warm clothes, it snows in Scotland.'

Jin Yu asked:

'Should I start to get ready to leave?'

'No time like the present.'

Jin Yu felt the snowflakes settling upon him, chilling his skin, giving him goose bumps. He'd only been to England twice in the winter and never further north. He remembered being bundled up in a heavy duffle coat and taken by his father's driver to see London in the mist under a drizzling rain. Another time he'd gone with his elder brother, Han Yu, during the Christmas holidays to visit Han Yu's first wife. She had gone to live in London with their two daughters after the divorce, but now the girls were older Han Yu had stopped bothering. He had a new wife and a son and instead he took his daughters out to dinner whenever he was in London on business.

That evening Jin Yu lay on his bed and looked around his room, the truth of his departure pressed down upon him. He knew he was about to leave behind the last traces of his childhood, yet he wasn't sure he was ready. Goodbye to the fat schoolboy in elastic knee socks, sitting in the back row of an old picture house. Dreaming under a beam of thick silver dust spinning in the projector light, dreaming he was a hero in a Wuxia film, fighting for honour and skilled in martial arts.

He'd been Jin Yu the Bearded Warrior hero, his face as ruddy as jujubes, with crimson lips and brows like streaks of smeared paint, his eyes bright as stars. He'd suffered tragedy and betrayal in early life and had lost his loved ones at the hands of evil villains. Luckily he'd been aided by the immortals and they'd taught him the secrets of Kung Fu. And in the end there'd always been a final dramatic showdown where he'd exacted a terrible vengeance upon his nemesis: a clashing of swords on a western bridge, hacked limbs flying south, heads to the north and bloated corpses with their eyes pecked out by three legged crows, floating in the heaving current of the red river.

The hero Jin Yu always had a beautiful maiden to accompany him on his adventures. She was a lovely fairy of royal blood and dazzling teeth, causing him to fall in love. Later she would be kidnapped and forced to marry the villain's ugly son, but would be saved in the nick of time by Jin Yu and his helpers.

That night, facing his departure for a remote Scottish University he sagged inside. He knew he would never project streams of energy at his opponents from far away, nor send them hurtling to the skies to explode into ten thousand pieces. He had to leave the boy behind. Jin Yu was too ashamed to daydream any longer, yet the thought of going to live on the other side of the world in the cold Northern light alone seemed like a great hardship to bear. He wished he could have a beautiful maiden to accompany him on his adventures. He possessed no martial arts, just



algebra and geometry and still he hoped he would be heroic.

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Two full moons had passed from when he'd first met Mandy in that back street market, and since then he'd taken her out each day to see the sights in Perak. He'd courted her beneath mountain waterfalls, deep inside limestone cave temples and before mosques with golden minarets. They'd gone by boat through the mangrove forests to the beaches at Lumut and to see the fishing villages on Pangkor Island and he'd taken her into the heart of the jungle where she'd glistened with sweat.

Now sitting together on the hotel veranda, Jin Yu told her the story of his exile in Scotland. Mandy was lying on a planter chair, her legs splayed wide open resting on the long warped arm rests. There were two Malay boys squatting in the forecourt watching her, and an Indian man on the veranda dressed in a grubby white jacket and sarong; he was hanging around watering the burnt palms, bending down low to see between her legs as the water from his rusty can trickled on the floor creating a puddle.

'Why Scotland?' she asked Jin Yu, 'Crap weather, heavy drinkers and bloody sheep... and dead boring.'

'Mandy close your legs, don't sit like that, everyone is looking at you.'

'So what, I don't care. This is how you're supposed to sit on these chairs. Tell them to bugger off if you want. So why Scotland?'

'My father wanted me to go,' he sighed, 'it's a good university.'

'So what? You should have put your foot down.'

He felt a sadness welling up inside, so many painful memories were in his heart. He was hungry for her sympathy.

'I was really sad. I never knew you could feel so lonely. There were people around me all day long but I was always alone.'

He picked open his old scabbed memories and waited for her, searching for some compassion. She didn't listen or see, only heard his singsong voice wheedling like a sad old bagpipe.

She yawned, 'Why didn't you leave or make some friends?'

'I did make friends, but no one special, not till I met Alison and she broke my heart.'

She burst out laughing. She wanted him to laugh too at the pathetic picture he'd painted of himself; of the lonely fat Chinese student haunting the corridors, bearing a midriff of doom.

'How can you be so cruel?'

She looked at him and laughed harder.

'Stop laughing.'

'Tell me about her. I want to know the whole story. Have you got any photos?'

'At home.'

'Then go and fetch them, it'll only take you a minute.'

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He went to all the university parties: first the Michaelmas disco where he didn't dance but watched, then the New Year ball where he tried to join in the fun with student games and balanced a beer bottle on his head; later there was the Three Legged Dance where he finally got tied to a girl, his left leg joined to her right.

When Alison bestowed a smile on him, his heart took flight. She smelt of butterscotch and fresh laundry. She whispered:

'Just follow me.'

Her fragrant breath tickled his ear and her voice sounded like the sweet chirping of a baby bird as she said:

'I love being kind and I'm studying Sociology.'

Jin Yu gripped her shoulders in a boozed trance wanting to perform a mating dance. Her face burned dark red and she told him:

'Stop the others will laugh at us.'

After that he'd follow her around, just to say hello to her whenever she passed by. At night he lay stiffly in bed dreaming of her. Lust burned in his heart. One day, dressed in a tweed jacket and floppy bow tie and his face like a stuffed dumpling, he asked her to the cinema. He behaved like a gentleman and afterwards he took her to a restaurant where they talked of their future ambitions.

He was too choked up to say, 'make money and get power', so he said:

'I want to make a difference.'

Then he asked her what her dreams were.

'To be a social worker,' she replied and blushed, 'I come from a poor family.'

He smiled and told her:

'Your parents must be very proud of you.'

After that she got into the habit of saying 'yes' whenever he asked her out. She had been worried in case he tried to kiss her or touch her hand, but he only stared longingly at her. She watched his fingers tracing tiny circles on the tablecloths in restaurants, as though he were touching her nipples through her blouse. She could feel his eyes upon her and see his hand gently squeezing the velvet armrest between them in the dark cinemas, and she began to wonder if she might want him too. She was going home for the summer and he said he'd be all alone over the long holiday, it was too far to go home to Malaysia; as though he would be travelling by steamboat, the paddles churning slowly across the seas, he could almost smell the sooty smoke from the funnel. He thought he'd go to Greece and Cyprus instead.

Then he asked her:

'Will you come with me?'

She said:

'I don't have any money.'

'No problem, I'll pay, you're my best friend.'

'Just as friends?'

'Of course.'

So she let him buy her a ticket and book their separate hotel rooms and told Mum and Dad:

'I'm going with a girl, I saved the money waitressing in the students café.'

Once there amidst the ruins her heart melted. They stood under a sky the colour of red wine, the crumbling columns around them like silent sentries. Jin Yu paid with American express and she felt wistful. On the seventh day they took a small ferryboat to Chrysi in the Libyan sea and wandered through the ancient Lebanon cedar forest. They marvelled at the parched twisted branches strung with brittle green leaves reaching up to the sun with clawed hands. They breathed in the sweet intoxicating aroma of cedar. The tree barks had split open, their roots were like dried squid tentacles sucking deep into the white sand. They visited the Minoan ruins and after they drank ouzo in a taverna by the port. Inside it was dark and cool and the ouzo burned a fire in Alison.

He told her:

'I want us to spend the night together.'

She blushed and whispered:

'I don't know.'

Her face was burning up. He slid the cold glass bottleneck into his hot mouth, the ouzo slid down his throat firing up his guts. The old waiter brought plates of Meze to their table and told them the Greek name for each dish:

'Gavros marinatos, Saganaki, Revithia keftdes, Prassokeftdes, Kotokeftedes, Kavourikeftdes.'

Until their lips were greasy and their faces flushed, and that night she went to bed with him and let him make love to her. There in that land on the edge of Asia she became Jin Yu's lover, she felt so sophisticated and he bought her a pair of French sunglasses.

Back at university she started to hide from him; too much to study, and she dashed to her dormitory and read about class systems and traditional Chinese family structures. Not giving up, he rented a white house in St Monans on the east coast of Fife overlooking the silver grey North Sea. From the windows she could see the fishing boats anchored in the harbour. She loved this house much more than her student's room or even the council flat where she had grown up. Jin Yu asked her to move in.

They had a house warming dinner party. The beer got spilt, the carpets got burned with crushed fag butts and John Mcluskey was sick on the stairs. They had a buffet of Chinese delicacies and after everyone had left they found a used condom in the bed.

On St. Martin's Day he took her to Edinburgh, and they walked in the rain down cobbled streets that glistened in the wet like shiny mirrors. In and out of shops, the drizzle wrapped them in a soft web, and he stood and watched in wonder as she opened a red umbrella like a blossoming flower, enclosing them in a warm vermilion light. Their faces became blushing and bittersweet, and they walked on for miles under a ruby glow while she told him the story of St. Martin.

She said:

'In ancient times, a Roman soldier retired from the army to lead a pure and simple life, and eventually he became a monk. One winter's day he cut his cloak in half to share with a beggar in a snowstorm. But guess what? The beggar was really Jesus, and Jesus told the Angels how kind the soldier had been and that's how he became a Saint.'

'That's a beautiful story Alison.'

He was happy to have somebody to love, and he marvelled at her goodness. He bought her a wardrobe full of beautiful clothes and she tried to change him with flared denim jeans and bright coloured track suits instead of his dreary tailored jackets. She wished he'd fit in better. Jin Yu looked hopeful in his gaudy student's guise, anything to have her.

He wanted to meet her parents and she suddenly felt doubtful. When she was due to go home for the Christmas holiday he suggested they go together. She told him they were too poor, they had no guest room and she shared a bedroom with her sisters. If he liked he could come and fetch her with the car on the last day, have lunch, and they'd return to Fife together. He was happy as hell and asked her for the millionth time to tell him all about her family. How old were her sisters? And what her cat's name was? And how Gina broke her leg?

At home she told them:

'My friend, Jin Yu, is coming for lunch.'

Her father asked:

'Is he your laddie?'

'Yes.'

'Where's he from?'

'Malaysia.'

The day he arrived she felt ashamed. She told her parents:

'He's just a boyfriend, we're not serious or anything.'

Jin Yu had bought gifts, Belgium chocolates for Mum and old malt whiskey for Dad. Her sisters didn't like him because he had no muscles and reminded them of the boy at the Chinese takeaway. Dad taunted him and Alison's mother was disappointed. Jin Yu stroked the cat, the cat licked its arse and the sisters laughed behind his back.

They sat down to eat in the kitchen. Dad said:

'Hope ye enjoy what we have to offer.' He was chewing black pudding with his mouth open.

Alison explained:

'Dad thought you'd enjoy a taste of traditional Scottish food.'

Dad's teeth were full of gristle and he said:

'I'm wanting a drink.'

Mum passed him the bottle of malt whisky and he drank a glassful then asked Jin Yu:

'You'll be coming from China?'

Alison interrupted:

'Dad, I told you he's from Malaysia!'

'I know.' He glared at Alison then turned back to Jin Yu:

'I hear ye take my lass to the pictures.'

'Yes we sometimes go to see films.' Jin Yu answered carefully. He put his knife and fork together, he couldn't eat anymore, he felt sick.

'Are ye through?' Dad asked him, and he filled Jin Yu's glass to the brim with whisky and bellowed:

'Cock the wee finger!'

Mum put a restraining hand on Dad's arm:

'Don't Angus, the lass is made up with him.'

Dad shrugged and announced:

'He's neither eechie nor ochie.'

Alison stared at her plate and Dad pointed his fork at her:

'Now lass don't put on a sour face, there's no harm if I take a rise out of your laddie.'

Mum felt sorry. She told Dad:

'He's not getting a word you say.'

Dad laughed:

'Aye right!' He turned to Jin Yu in earnest, 'Ye have too much money, there were once a man an a wife down the street that didn't have any bairns so long as they was rich, but when they became poor, thay had a wee lad.'

In the bedroom while she packed her sisters said:

'Play the field, and get out more. You're too young, you're wasting your chances.'

The following summer Jin Yu left early for his father's birthday and she was to join him in Malaysia for the last three weeks. Jin Yu waited in Ipoh for time to pass while Alison drank beer from dark brown bottles and forged ahead from one rock festival to the next; treading with bare feet in wet green grass, journeying through the littered cans underfoot she realised the stage was her temple alter. This was exciting and real, and this was the life and she didn't want to be Jin Yu's girl anymore.

Her friends warned her of Malaysia and foreign men and Muslim countries and told her she should take time to reflect. They knew that Jin Yu meant business; this was no passing romance for him.

They told her:

'He's more serious. You know, he's from a different culture.'

She went anyway but with lots of misgivings. Jin Yu was there at the airport. She walked towards him with small mincing steps and giggled:

'Hi Babe.'

But it felt wrong now. She felt bad and Mum had said don't lead him on. Unnerved by dark faces and miles of ghetto she stood on the roadsides like a lonely tree while the hot wind blew her hair. Every time they stepped out of their air-conditioned hotel she found herself in heat and squalor. The underlying hint of rotting rubbish and spices tickled her nostrils and seeped into the fibres of her clothes.

So he took her to the mountains, where they sat on a veranda watching a gentle rainfall under a golden light shed by an oil lantern. He put his arm around her thin back as she shivered in the chilled air. Then after he took her to Ipoh to meet his family. His mother was dead and his father and

elder brother were polite but unimpressed by this shy girl. They secretly wondered why she wished to become a social worker, and murmured:

‘Sociology, Ahh very interesting!’

Then they asked her:

‘And your parents?’

Her parents were poor and her job aspirations without ambition, they too hoped this was a passing phase.

He had the whole itinerary organised, so they did the rounds of beautiful locations. Whenever they stopped for something to eat she saw thin children and flies swarming round the street food stalls, she hated spicy food and was glad not to eat theirs, instead she ate Western the whole time in top hotels. She couldn’t live with a rich man and see kids without shoes living in leaky huts, and legless beggars on their trolleys at the train station. She saw hypocrisy and greed in his smiling pale yellow face.

‘I’m going into social work.’ she announced.

‘There’s lots of opportunity here in charity, I’ll supply the bucks.’

‘No! I want to get my hands dirty.’

‘If you must, our family has an orphanage founded by my great grandfather. Will that do?’

‘No I don’t want to play Lady Bountiful.’

She couldn’t live without losers and pubs and bus stops, and here they were too awful. She’d be shut up in five star, dependent on Jin Yu for everything.

Later when they returned to Fife she began staying at the library in the evening. She told him:

‘I’ve so much to read and reference, finals coming up next year. Too many books to lug home, I need to study in the group.’

She ended up in the Student Union bar.

One night he went looking for her, and he stood watching her through the doorway like he had a pebble in his shoe. She was singing, he saw her lips twist and smile; he saw she was making up someone to be. Her bright red cheeks were painted on, like in a charade her hands never stopped moving, fluttering like a hundred swallows.

Afterwards she told him:

‘I had some time to kill, I just came in to join the crowd.’

Jin Yu knew he was losing her, so bought her a diamond ring and asked her to marry him on New Years Eve. She would rather have been at the pub, drunk and singing Auld Lang Syne. He put all his cards on the table and lost. She shook her head, her wispy hair glittering like a halo in the neon light while her face burned red. She whispered:

‘I can’t, I have my future career.’

‘What about us?’

‘I’m just starting out in life, it’s too soon.’

‘But I need you.’

‘Sorry.’

‘How can I go on without you?’

She couldn't bare it and needed to consol him, she told him:

'Look, I still love you, but no big commitments.'

In the months before he left, he cried in front of her and was ashamed, but he couldn't stop himself from driving her away. She called it time out for reflection and she wished he'd leave right away, but they had to reach the end of term. As summer drew closer and he knew he'd be returning home without her, he became mad with grief and she felt guilty.

In the end she said:

'Mum thinks we are too young.' She watched his eyes fill up. 'And what can I do? Our relationships are shifting as we mature. Who knows? No promises mind, but I'll come for Christmas.'

Jin Yu arrived home to a ghostly house and a sober welcome from his brother and father. He had no time to wallow; there were business plans and projects to shift. He spent his nights writing to her, striking each day off the calendar, watching the days that stretched between him and her diminish. He wrote how much he loved her and how he hoped their time apart would make her realise. She wrote back occasionally and each letter began with, 'Sorry I've not written earlier, been so busy' and they ended with, 'Love from Alison'.

Jin Yu tried to feel the words 'love from' were the same as 'I love you' but he knew they were not. He called on the phone but she was never there. She was working at a school and loved the staff room that stank of stale smoke and coffee, and having her salary and the pub. She took up smoking Players and met a man with blue eyes and long wavy hair. She wrote Jin Yu a letter; she told him it was over and she'd met some one else.

Then years went by until one day she wrote again, by then she was married to a poet and they were living on a farm growing their own food. She was terribly broke and expecting a baby and please could he help. Phang Jin Yu sent her a cheque.

\*

Mandy held the photo in her hand and peered into the scene. There were two figures standing slightly apart on a steep hillside of monotonous muddy green under a heavy grey sky. They were both wearing matching tracksuits, his and hers. The girl was slight and thin with pale lips; her hair dusty blonde with a lank fringe framing a sweet face full of goodness and honesty. Jin Yu stood next to her like a nylon clad humpty dumpty embracing the great outdoors.

'Where were you?'

'In the highlands. Alison loved walking and she loved nature. We used to go hiking at weekends; just take a rucksack and follow the footpaths and at night we'd find a small guesthouse to stay in.'

Mandy frowned, she knew Jin Yu hated walking; he was dead lazy. She could see him plonking along behind his shy waif, with blisters and a rumbling tummy; maybe not moaning, but waiting for dusk, waiting to reach the guesthouse.

'How boring, Mary and Joseph searching for the inn.'

'Don't say that! Alison was a really nice girl, she had a good heart and she was very kind. Her family were poor and she was at university on a student's grant. She was studying Sociology. I took her to Greece and Cyprus, look...'

He handed her another photo that was faded and bleached. Alison was standing on the steps of the Parthenon; she was wearing knee length khaki shorts and Jesus sandals. Squinting under the glaring sun, she was the colour of the stones behind her.

'Did you bring her here to Malaysia?'

'She came here in the summer holidays, but it was too hot for her. She was upset by the poverty and I took her to the Cameron highlands to get away from it all.'

'The poverty? You said she was poor!'

'You know it's not the same. I took her outstation to visit the jungle kampongs near our tin mines and she felt so sorry for the villagers she cried.'

'Wet Cow.'

'Mandy don't be bitchy, she was training to be a social worker and she loved children.'

'Hold on while I have a little boohoo. It's so sad, seeing these poor kids living in thatched houses surrounded by nature. Poor devils with no electricity, no shoes and shock horror no social workers. Oh my God! I wish I could gather them up and re-house them in a block of council flats.'

'Shut up!'

'She should have saved her tears for when she got back to bloody Glasgow or wherever she came from. Your little miss goody two shoes was full of shit.'

He was secretly pleased. He loved her, loved to hear her ripping Alison into shreds. She excited him, laying there with her legs open for all the men to look between, waving her cigarette around and blowing smoke in his face. He forgot how sorry he felt and forgot the Scottish girl.

'Let's go up to our room.' He wanted her so badly.

Later she lay on the bed wrapped in a shiny red sari embroidered with gold medallions and she told him:

'I want a gin and tonic, lots of ice and lemon, and a mango.'

'Let's go down to the bar, and why don't you wear your new black dress?'

He shyly passed her the dress, still wrapped in tissue paper, still in its box.

'It's really nice.' he coaxed her.

She frowned:

'No, I want to wear this sari. I love it.'

He thought of Padma, the Hindu maid that crept around his house; her presence like a pungent aroma that hung in the shadows, reminding him of someone he'd known many years before, someone who still gave him nightmares. Padma greased her hair and wove it into thick black plaits that smelt of coconut oil; on her days off she'd wear a dazzling sari and thin



brass bangles click-clacking on her hairy arms. And before walking out the iron gates and down the dusty road towards the Hindu temple, she'd draw a scarlet red tilak symbol over her third eye.

He told her:

'Mandy you look silly, you remind me of one of my servants. You should be ashamed, dressing like a Hindu.'

'This is not a cleaning woman's sari. This could belong to a Maharani. It's beautiful. Touch it! You know nothing. I bought this in Benares; it's hand woven silk and gold. What's wrong with dressing like a Hindu anyhow?'

'You're not in London now; you can't go around like that. You'll offend people.'

'Who? The Malays or the Chinese? I bet the Indians couldn't give a damn. I'm going down to the restaurant; I'm having my gin and tonic and a mango and then I want rice and curry for dinner.'

His heart beat hard. He couldn't bear to walk down into the restaurant with her dressed in a gaudy red and gold sari. He needed to invent something. He lied:

'They may not let you in the dining room. There's a dress code, Western style or Malaysian national costume.'

'Then I don't want to stay here anymore! I want to leave right now. No one's going to tell me what I can or can't wear.'

Her sassy retort gave him hope, he'd already asked her before, now he might hit his mark.

'Then come to my home and you can do everything you want.' He whispered, 'I want you to live with me. Mandy, you know how much I love you.'

She heard him like a tired corny song and she barely glanced at him; when all he wanted was to see something sacred in her eyes.

She asked him:

'Don't you live with your older brother and his wife?'

'I have a separate annexe. You won't have to see them.'

'I'm not changing though, I'm walking right out of here in this sari or they'll have to rip it off me.'

He had lost the sari battle but won the first war and his heart soared; she would be living under his roof. He told her:

'I'll buy you an antique opium bed and you can lie upon it and I will tell you stories.'

'What stories?'

'The story of the Jade Emperor and the immortals, and Chinese fairy tales.'

'Tell me one now.'

'Then lie down.'

*The girl lies down on the bed and the man undresses her.*

*He unwraps her from the shining red silk sari.*

*She lays still and naked while he strokes her pink nipples.*

*He trails his hand down between her legs touching her shining red clitoris and then he gently covers her with a white sheet. He tells her to shut her eyes and he'll tell her a story.*

“Once upon a time there was a snow-white jade dragon who lived in a rock cave on the east bank of the celestial river. Across the river in a great forest lived a beautiful golden phoenix. One day, while the jade dragon was swimming in the celestial river he saw the phoenix flying in the sky above him and he followed her. He swam below her through the water until they both came to an enchanted island.

The phoenix landed by the shore and the dragon watched her as she metamorphosed. The phoenix had the head of a golden pheasant, which transformed into the head of a beautiful girl with golden hair. Her mandarin duck body changed into the soft curves of a young maiden with velvet smooth skin. Her peacock tail became long silken tresses cascading down her back. She had the legs of a crane, which grew into long supple legs and her parrot beak turned into a smiling cherry red mouth. Her swallow wings fluttered around her becoming graceful arms with delicate tiny hands tipped with pearly pink nails.

After her metamorphosis the phoenix walked into the celestial river and floated on her back. Her long golden hair fanned out behind her and her breasts like two ripe pomegranates bobbed on the water's surface as the tiny waves licked over them. The dragon felt the fires of passion burn within and he began to metamorphose too.

He had the head of a proud camel that transformed into the head of a young man. His golden brown stag horns sprouted into thick curling locks of hair. He blinked his red demon eyes shut, and when he opened them they were as black as coals. He had the belly of a clam that slowly turned soft on the surface and rippled with hard muscles. He shed his carp scales and they floated away like diamonds revealing a smooth skin fragrant of moss. His eagle claws transformed into forceful hands and his rugged tiger soles turned sinewy and fleet footed. His cow ears became human, and lo and behold the dragon had become a handsome dark eyed man.

He swam behind the phoenix and tugged her long hair.

She flipped over in the water and said, ‘You’ve been following me.’

‘I was hypnotised by your beauty and magnificence and now I have seen you, I can not live without knowing you.’

She smiled and asked, ‘Do you wish to know me carnally?’

‘Indeed I do.’ he answered, watching her breasts ripen in the jade green water.

They swam side by side in the deep river and she told him, ‘I must return to my golden phoenix form before the moon rises.’

And so he took her to the island shore and laid her upon the golden sand; and there under the setting sun, he possessed her and told her he'd never let her go. Later they stood together on the river shore as the moon

rose and they returned to their true forms.

She whispered, 'I promise you we'll meet here each day when the sun has passed its zenith, and then until the moon rises we can be together as man and girl.'

Then the golden phoenix flew back to the forest and the jade dragon swam to his dark cave. After that they met every afternoon and turned themselves into the young girl and the dark eyed man and made love in the red light of the sunset. Each night they transformed back to being the phoenix and the dragon. Only on the black night of the new moon were they able to remain in their human bodies, and he would hold her in his arms while she rested her head upon his chest. They would listen to the river lapping on the shore till just before sunrise.

On the night of the seventh new moon as they sat in darkness, they saw a gigantic shining pebble laying on the sand as though lit by the rays of a full moon. They were so fascinated by its beauty that the phoenix and the dragon decided to carve it into a pearl. Every day while many more moons passed they worked on carving the pebble. The jade dragon used his claws and the golden phoenix used her beak until at last it was a perfect round ball. Then the phoenix flew to the sacred mountain to gather drops of dew and the jade dragon carried water from the celestial river; they bathed the ball with dew and water until it turned into a dazzling pearl. They fell in love with this iridescent ball, and so too they fell in love with each other. They settled down to live together on the enchanted island guarding their magical pearl. Wherever the pearl shone, flowers of all seasons bloomed together and the land yielded rich harvests.

Now one night, it so happened that the queen mother of the western heavens left her jade palace in the Kun Lun Mountains to go for a stroll around the stars. She was an ugly, spiteful, celestial immortal and suffered from a burning bile that rose from her guts. This bile was caused by the hate and envy she nursed in her heart. The queen mother had discovered that walking briskly aided her to burp, thus releasing the poisonous foul gasses straight out of her mouth.

As she marched around the stars like a soldier swinging her arms and emitting puffs of smelly green smoke, she saw the brilliant rays shed by the pearl far away down on the earth. She was overwhelmed by the sight and let out the biggest burp ever. Her husband the jade emperor, who lived on the ninth storey of the jade palace was blown across his chamber by the evil green wind. The queen mother flew back over the palace wall, which was built of pure gold and was over one thousand miles long. She flew to the lake of jewels and saw that she possessed nothing comparable to the shining pearl.

Alas, that night, unable to sleep she became bad tempered. She slapped more than one hundred serving maids as they tried to lull her into slumber. In vain they sang her sweet songs and applied cool perfumed presses to her furrowed brow, but she could not rest till she possessed the pearl for herself. One hundred jade maidens ran crying from the queen mother's chambers with tears running down their lily-white faces; their cheeks bearing her handprint and cuts from her spiky rings. One by one the queen mother's

guards ran away behind the jade maidens, and the last one to remain covered by the door waiting for his chance to escape.

'You! Come closer. You must go and steal that gigantic pearl for me. At once!' the queen mother ordered him.

The guard cringed at her knees and whispered, 'I dare not your majesty. It belongs to the jade dragon and the golden phoenix.'

The queen mother boxed his ears and shouted, 'Buffoon! Worm! How dare you contradict me? I am the queen mother of the western heavens and everything belongs to me. Why should they possess the largest pearl ever seen? It is more beautiful than the moon and it never waxes nor wanes, I will have it!'

The guard, grovelling and bowing, began to walk backwards towards the door. He said slyly, 'Remember what your husband said your majesty? The jade emperor doesn't want any more trouble right now.'

The queen mother clapped her hands thrice and a silver sword flew through the air pinning the guard to the door by his robes.

'Silence!' she screamed, 'You'll do as I say, or I shall transform myself into the skin of a tiger and wrap myself around a diseased wanderer and bring the plague to your home.'

The celestial guard had no choice and departed on the queen mother's orders. Before sunrise he returned with the pearl and handed it over to her. She hid it in the innermost room of her palace behind one thousand locked doors.

The following morning when the dragon and the phoenix woke they saw their pearl was gone. They desperately searched high and low for it. The jade dragon looked in every nook and cranny of the celestial river while the golden phoenix combed every inch of the sacred mountain, but alas it had vanished.

The following full moon, the birthday of the queen mother came around and she invited all the immortals in heaven. It was well known that in her garden at the jade palace she cultivated the peaches of immortality. The magical peach tree only grew peaches once every three thousand years, and then they took a further three thousand years to ripen. This year was very special, as on the night of her birthday the peaches were ready; they were so fragrant, so ripe and everyone came.

The immortals arrived at the jade palace to celebrate. They sat at the banquet table devouring the soft peaches, ripping through the delicate skins with their sharp teeth, the sweet juices running down their chins. The queen mother wore a tiger's head mounted on a crown upon her head and she sat on a leopard skin throne; she was facing east, clothed in seven layers of blue clouds with a jade maiden by her side.

She still had three peaches on a silver platter and she shouted out loud over the slurping and sucking. 'Tonight we will bestow these peaches on three new pretenders!'

There was a hushed silence and then they all began to cry out their favourite's name.

'There's Zhong Li-quan.'

'You mean that fat bare bellied Taoist?'  
 'He's a nifty geezer.'  
 'He can wave his feathered fan and bring the dead back to life!'  
 'Big deal! I can do that without a fan.'  
 'He materialises silver coins and gives them to the poor.'  
 'All right! Send a celestial cloud to fetch him.'  
 'Who else?'  
 'Lan Caihe!'  
 'Are you mad? That drunken fool, slopping around with one shoe on and one shoe off.'  
 'He can transform snow into hot steam!'  
 'No, No, No! He's a shifty feller and a cross dressing lady boy!'  
 'Lu Dong Bin then?'  
 'No, No, No! He's a glutton for wine!'  
 'Wait your majesty! Did you know he can travel hundreds of miles in the blink of an eye?'  
 'Really? Well I never! Send for him too and now who?'  
 'Han Xian Zi.'  
 'You mean Lu Dong Bin's mate?'  
 'Yes that's him! He has the skills of prophesy.'  
 'No, No and No! He's been very rude to the monks and writes bad poetry, maybe next time.'  
 'There's still one peach left!'  
 'Zhang Guo Lao!'  
 'The death faker?'  
 'That's him. He travels thousands of miles a day, riding backwards on a white donkey. And at night when he rests, he transforms the donkey into a piece of paper, folds it up and puts it in his pocket.'  
 'Really? And then what?'  
 'Easy! In the morning, he just sprinkles the paper with water, and ta-da, the donkey is ready to trot.'  
 'And is it true he can turn into a bat?'  
 'For sure!'  
 'Well, we'll have him then as our third guest. But wait my friends! I haven't finished with my lovely surprises. I will stun you now with a vision of the most wonderful treasure.'  
 The queen mother wanted to show off the pearl, and when she brought it out from its hiding place all nine floors of the jade palace were lit up by its radiance.  
 'See my dears! See what mummy of the west has?'  
 And the dragon and the phoenix saw the light too from their enchanted island. Losing no time they flew straight to the heavens, over the thousand mile golden wall, over the lake of precious jewels and into the banquet hall, and they demanded the queen mother give back their pearl.  
 The queen mother was enraged. 'Clean the wax from your ear holes and listen to this! I am the wife of the jade emperor, mother of the western heavens; all heavenly treasures belong to me!'

The jade dragon replied, 'Heaven did not give birth to this pearl, nor was it grown on earth. It was carved and polished by us, it took many years of hard work to create the pearl and it is ours!'

The queen mother turned scarlet and great clouds of purple vapours billowed from her nostrils. Her nails grew into long horny claws, she opened her black mouth baring her tiger's fangs and screamed, 'I'll be damned before I let you have this pearl back!'

'Then don't let us have it back.' replied the golden phoenix. 'We will take it from you as you stole it from us. You conniving vixen!'

The queen mother flew at them hissing and growling and all three began to fight. During the battle the pearl slipped from the queen mother's grasp and landed on the floor. It rolled across the hall and down the staircase and fell into the sky. In a flash the dragon and the phoenix flew after the pearl; they desperately tried to catch hold of it, but it was too late and as the pearl landed on earth it turned into a clear jade green lake.

In the end the dragon and the phoenix could not bring themselves to leave their pearl behind, so they decided to turn themselves into two mountains with the lake between them. Ever since then, the jade dragon mountain and the golden phoenix mountain have stood beside the west lake and each new moon, a dark eyed man and a young girl make love upon the sands of the western shore."

\*

Jin Yu was furious. His eyes darted as wildly as the Jade Emperor's eyes when he'd discovered the Queen Mother had turned his favourite concubine into a donkey. He'd just received a phone call from his construction manager telling him that the group of squatter's shacks they were supposed to demolish had a large crowd gathered out front. The squatters were carrying placards. Journalists from the local newspapers were there, but what made the bile rise in his throat and swamp his vocal chords was the presence of Chung Hoi Fat. He began tapping on the intercom:

'Amir, Amir come here, Amir!'

The office manager Amir came panting through the doorway, his face glowing like a treacle glazed pot. He nodded and told Jin Yu:

'Yes, Yes I know. It's the Hoi Fat chap. No worries lah! What is he? Who is he? Nothing! Just a hero of lost causes.'

'He won the constituency in Tipah.'

'I know, I know.' Amir shook his head from side to side in disgust, 'Did you see his campaign poster? My God lah! How we laughed.' He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow, 'My wife told me his hairstyle is known as a ducks arse, and did you see he was carrying two Chinese babies?' He nodded in admiration, 'Very clever! I wonder who he borrowed them from?'

Jin Yu grumbled:

'I bought that building land with valid permits on the understanding

that the squatters had accepted compensation.'

'Ah so! Yes, twenty-three squatter families all moved on.' Amir shrugged, 'But you know how it is? There is always one who won't get out the way, like a nasty boil, by the name of Lee Cheng Hu.'

'Why not? What's the problem?'

'Well he doesn't actually live in this shack but has a house elsewhere. He's a cheeky rascal, face as red as a chicken's arse and uses the shack to raise pigs.' Amir threw up his hands, his eyes stretched wide with visions, 'My God! You should see the garden, full of concrete pens, blood, squeals and stinking shit. And can you believe he owns a BMW? So I offered him fifteen-hundred bucks to sling his hook.'

Jin Yu told him:

'That's far less than the other families got.'

'Is that wrong?'

'No you did the right thing.'

Angered by Cheng Hu's ingratitude and knowing the law back to front, Jin Yu considered withdrawing any offer of compensation. He huffed:

'Cheng Hu doesn't have a leg to stand on, I need time to think.'

The whole situation had blown up and if he backed down now he'd lose face. He'd never intervene, but send someone else to confront the squatter family. He knew the building work would be held up unless he acted fast.

'Send the lawyer,' he ordered, 'and tell him to hear them out, but offer no agreements, and get the names of the journalists.'

Amir would take care of the local Malay papers, though he had no idea how to deal with Chung Hoi Fat.

That night Jin Yu had a dream.

*He is walking down a darkened street that seems to go on forever; there is no moon to show the way, just a dim light glowing from a cafe on the roadside. Large oily drops of rain start to splash around him, and he runs for shelter under the cafe awnings. Through the doorway he sees Hoi Fat inside; no longer a man but a mythical Hsigo, with the body of a monkey, the tail of a dog and the wings of a bird.*

*Hoi Fat is making a papier-mâché dummy head; he spins it around on his gluey fingertips, a kaleidoscope of shiny tinfoil and rice paper. He decorates his creation with dull beer bottle cap eyes stuck too close together and greasy string hair matted like a bird's nest. Jin Yu sees this mock-up head is an effigy of himself, with "Greed" stamped on its forehead in red letters and plastic Halloween vampire teeth for its mouth.*

*Hoi Fat stuffs one of his father's old suits with newspapers making a lumpy Guy Fawkes fit for a bonfire. He joins the body to the head and ra ta-da! He presents Jin Yu, the rich Chinese businessman. By now the house shop is filled with villagers, who grin and nudge each other. They whisper as Hoi Fat cuts out paper silhouettes of skinny kids and screws them up and places them under the rich*

*man's feet. It looks like a gaudy nativity scene. The villagers gather around this effigy, shoving and daring each other to get closer, showing they are not afraid of it. They smile with glee as Hoi Fat strikes the match.*

\*

Mandy had been living with Jin Yu for several months and she sometimes wondered how long it could go on for. At other times she believed she was fond of her fat lover, but asked herself if she would ever fall in love with him.

On the night she'd arrived they'd driven up to the compound gates and from the back seat she'd watched a thin dark man come out of a wooden sentry box; dressed as a guard with gold epaulets on his shoulders he'd carried a shining black shotgun. As they'd driven past she'd seen him slowly lift his gun up to the sky, pointing the barrel at the low moon. The guard had stood in the glaring headlights; his old shoes too large, his heart glowing like liquor in his eyes, and she'd wondered if he'd ever shot anyone. The house wasn't what she had hoped for; there were no stone Foo dogs guarding the gates, no painted vermilion door, and no spirit screen carved with dragons to protect the home from evil ghosts. It was just a modern split-level building with granite floors and large panoramic windows.

She spent hours in Jin Yu's study; the shelves were crammed with books and there were maps on the walls. She was disappointed though, as the books were about economics and law, and the maps were of his tin mines around Perak.

She searched through his library looking for things to read and at last found a shelf stuffed with old colonial books. While Jin Yu was away at the office, she'd sit on the opium bed reading about a land she'd always dreamed of; seeing the Malaysia she wanted to see. The books were filled with faded sepia photographs and as she turned the yellowed pages she peered into scenes that made her heart quiver. She saw a fat jowled Sultan with a wild tiger lying shot at his feet, he was surrounded by white men in topee hats and they held their hunting rifles aloft as they squinted in the sunlight. She peered at a Chinese Mandarin smoking on his opium couch wearing a silk robe embroidered with chrysanthemums, his white head was shaved and he had a long black pigtail. And in another book, a man from the Orang Asli tribe stood on the edge of the jungle wrapped in faded cloth, and upon his head a crown woven from leaf fronds that curled and grew through his wild bushy hair. These men with their faraway eyes had a strange effect upon her, casting a spell of desire and adventure in her heart. Mandy spent hours reading through books that smelt of mildew, turning the brown spotted pages as the glue came unstuck and the cotton thread rotted and the spines fell apart.

“Seafarers refer to ethnic groups living by the sea in Southeast Asia, sometimes known as Sea Gypsies in the South China Sea area, Sulawesi sea and Sabah. The ethnic group



name is known as Bajau laut and Orang laut, which literally means "the sea people" in Malay.

These Malay people of Southeast Asia trace their forbears to Yunnan some 5000–10000 years ago. They were seafarers that migrated along rivers such as Mekong and Irrawady to the Andaman Sea, South China Sea and various locations in the Malay Archipelago. In the 15th century, large numbers of Malay Seafarers converted to Islam.

Their knowledge of the sea enables them to live off its organisms by using simple tools such as nets and spears to forage for food. What is not consumed is dried atop their boats then used for trade at local markets for other necessities.

During the monsoon season, they build additional boats while occupying temporary huts. Many of the Orang Laut are still nomadic people who roam the sea most of their lives in small hand-crafted wooden boats, which serve not just as transportation, but also as their home with a kitchen, bedroom and living area.

Much of their traditional life, built on the premise of life as outsiders, is under threat and appears to be diminishing. The Sea Gypsies are a minority group that number only a few tens of thousands. They maintain a nomadic sea-based culture and live almost entirely on boats and practice shamanic rites”

Nomadic Tribes In South East Asia- Arthur Wang- MBE

She told Jin Yu:

‘I want to go and see the Orang Laut and sail with them on their boats.’

And he told her:

‘You wouldn’t like it, they’re gypsies and dangerous. You can’t just turn up and stay with them; they are not hotels. They’re bad people and you could get killed.’

‘I don’t believe you. Why don’t we go for a few weeks to Sabah?’

He paused, an incredulous expression on his face; then he said:

‘If you like I’ll take you to a wildlife park there. You can visit the orang-utans orphanage.’

She said:

‘I don’t want to see the bloody orang-utans. I want to see the orang laut.’

*"The rich Chinese man with pale skin, soft as a dumpling, afraid of the poor, afraid of envy, afraid to sit in a rotting boat feeling seasick. The Malay sea gypsies watch him, squatting on the deck watching him they roll tobacco into newspaper cigars, watching him while the red smouldering ends blaze as they puff, they watch him through smoke and sea mist and they see a rich man with a white girl and the rising water is filling his shoes.*

*The sea gypsies lash her to the mast with her fat millionaire, they make him walk the plank and watch him sink, his pockets heavy with gold. And after he's gone, the skinny white girl with long yellow hair lives in the crow's nest on the main mast. At night, she slides down the mast like butter on hot toast, and they roll dice to see who will have her and they wont let her go."*

\*

Jin Yu lived on the West side of the compound and his brother on the North. In the centre there was a courtyard pool and three large reception rooms that no one seemed to use. Mandy had wandered through these rooms; browsing among the jade Buddhas in glass wall units, poking about in the cupboards filled with antique ginger jars and snuff bottles. She'd glanced over the shiny leather sofas, the bare dining room table and the lonely cocktail cabinet, and wondered if she were in a waiting room, marking time until something would happen.

They never ate at home as Jin Yu would take her out to dinner every night; and while he was away during the day, there was a driver and car parked under the porch in case she wanted to go somewhere.

'What if I want a cup of tea or a snack?'

'Ask the maid!'

She tried the next morning, she wandered through Jin Yu's kitchen and tapped on the door to the maid's room.

Padma stood in the doorway doused in coconut oil. She was dressed in a housemaid smock cut like a maternity dress. She didn't look Mandy in the eye or smile, but waited; her hooded eyes fixed on a spot somewhere down on the floor, an aura of stubbornness hanging like a curtain between them.

Mandy smiled at the top of her head.

'Hiya, could you make me a coffee and toast with jam? You know Jam?'

Padma didn't answer her. Instead, with her head down; she shuffled over to the small bathroom off the kitchen, and opened the door pointing to the toilet.

'Not jamban! Forget it, just coffee. Coffee? Kopi? Christ it's like a dolls house with a waxwork maid'

That evening Jin Yu came home in a daze, his mind on business. Mandy had met an American couple at the botanical gardens earlier in the day and she'd brought them back to the house for dinner.

'House needs cheering up,' she told him, 'we never have any friends round.'

'Are they your friends?' he asked, 'It seems you've just picked them up off the street.'

'Maybe not,' she sighed, 'but they're better than nothing!'

'I don't think we have any food in the house.'

'Send Osman out for Chinese.'

Mandy had settled them on sun loungers around the pool. Marylou was six feet tall in hot pants and high heels. Spiros her Greek American boyfriend was short, dark and fat and wore a stomach girdle and no shirt. They were on a world cruise and had been left behind in Phuket, now they were hurrying through Malaysia to rejoin their ship in Singapore.

Spiros stood behind Marylou's sun bed massaging her shoulders, Marylou smiled, 'I told Spiros, we were gonna miss the ship.'

'She's right! But we were in Thailand and I wanted see the hill tribes. OK, so we missed the boat. No problem babe!'

Later, Padma set the table by the pool and put the Chinese food into dishes.

‘What’s this?’ Marylou asked, pointing at her plate.

‘Sea cucumber.’ Jin Yu told her.

‘Are you sure? Because it looks like something we had in Hong Kong and I can tell ya I never want to eat it again.’ She tossed her fork down on the table, ‘Tell’em Spiros, tell’em what I ate. It was called rising tiger meets flying phoenix or something.’

Spiros nodded, ‘Yeah! Donkey dick and donkey vagina.’

Spiros was grinning, his teeth were as white as snow and Jin Yu wondered if they were false. His eyes glinted as he watched Mandy and Jin Yu, like a hungry buzzard, like a card shark, like an old gangster.

‘I ride with the flow! I’m easy going.’ he told them, ‘I get up in the morning and I say, Marylou lets have some fun!’

Marylou giggled and Spiros said, ‘Who knows what we’ll do? Or where we’ll go? Now listen, no one could guess my real age, ever, because my mind is young!’

‘Sure honey!’ Marylou quipped, ‘No one would guess you’re ninety seven.’

‘Ha-ha, you see she’s so funny! She keeps me young.’ Spiros grabbed Marylou’s wrist. ‘See all these jewels on her? Make her happy that’s what I say. See the blue sapphire? Got that just last week in Ceylon, best sapphires in the world.’

‘And the Rolex in Switzerland!’ Marylou added.

She let Spiros wave her hand around, while she smiled and blew a kiss to him. Later Spiros followed Jin Yu into the house to call for a taxi to take them back to their hotel.

‘You and me we understand each other, right?’ Spiros asked Jin Yu. ‘Let me give you a word of advice. You like em young? So do I!’ He shook his head, ‘But yours is a real sour puss! Now my Marylou she’s a party. Understand? And remember never put a ring on their finger. Diamonds, sapphires, rubies, OK, but no wedding ring!’

After they’d left, Mandy went into the bedroom and saw Jin Yu’s jacket and tie thrown on the bed. She found him in the dining room drinking whisky.

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

She shrugged, ‘You hardly ever drink and you never sit in here.’

‘I’m waiting for Han Yu to get home.’

‘What’s wrong?’

He threw her a newspaper. ‘Read page three.’

She read it quickly. ‘So what?’ she asked, ‘Just offer him the money he wants and shut him up. It’s peanuts to you! Why do you care? No one even reads Kejujuran, it’s a stupid paper full of propaganda and who is Chung Hoi Fat?’

‘A local politician.’ he replied, his brow furrowing into deep lines. ‘It bothers me because I’m a private person. I’ve acted fairly, so why drag me in? You didn’t read the page with his letter to the readers.’

She turned over the page and read out loud, ‘Who is this Phang Jin Yu?’

Cousin to George Chok, chairman of the planning commission, that's who! And we must ask ourselves; how come this sly, yes my comrades let us say sly, let us call a spade a spade. How come this sly mover now owns the land your homes stand upon? Yes indeed, beware of this creeping crawling snake! Because right now, he could be opening his fat wallet, right in this very second he could be buying more Government land! It is my duty as your elected representative to assist you. A squatter should have rights to the land he has ploughed and toiled, and rights over the home where he has raised his children. We the MJP, propose to introduce a new bill for squatters at the next legislative assembly blah blah blah.'

'I'll have to suspend the demolition until we can reach an agreement with the Pig Man.' He moaned and took a sip of whiskey.

'Don't give in to the Bastard!'

'What? I'd have thought you'd have been number one champion for the poor blighter. You love underdogs!'

'I hate him! Don't you care what he's doing?' She tossed the paper on the table. 'He is raising poor baby pigs for the slaughter! And little pigs are so sweet; they feel love and fear just like us... Did you know pigs are as clever as dogs?'

Jin Yu shook his head; he had no idea and wondered if it were true.

She went on, 'Well they are. A famous pig saved a woman's life once, and you can keep them as pets.' She smiled sweetly at Jin Yu, 'I might keep pigs one day, when I have an apple orchard; and they'll be free to wander about.' Her eyes narrowed, 'I hope he gets sent to prison, he's a bloody butcher!'

Jin Yu told her, 'They don't send people to prison for raising and butchering pigs.'

'Well they should.'

Mandy left him alone to go to bed and soon after his brother came home. While Jin Yu waited for Han Yu to read the article he saw a servant passing by under the window in the dark, with a spade over his shoulder; he appeared sinister, like a bad omen, as though on his way to dig a grave, his face carved like a cracked wooden mask.

Han Yu folded the paper and chucked it in the bin then he poured himself a large whisky and smiled kindly at Jin Yu, he told him, 'You must reach a settlement and fast.'

'So is it true? Did George Chok grant the planning?'

'Of course not! That land was already in the urban planning program years ago, they couldn't find anyone to invest.'

'Thing is, they haven't actually accused us of corruption, just implied the possibility.' Jin Yu scowled, 'Anyway legally I don't have any obligations to pay off the squatters, I wish I hadn't bothered now.'

'Look, twenty-three or twenty-four, what's the difference? You'll have to pay him to shut him up.' He patted Jin Yu's shoulder, 'George will sort out Chung Hoi Fat; it's nothing to do with us. It's just bloody politics and that Hoi Fat is heading for trouble... didn't you know him at school? Weren't you good friends?'

Jin Yu told his brother, 'Hardly, he's younger than me. He was in a lower form.'

\*

Mandy stood outside Padma's room peering in through the doorway. She was intrigued by this sullen maid who crept around the house like a ghost, and she wondered if Jin Yu were afraid of her. She'd noticed he avoided Padma and would rather drive miles to a restaurant than ask her to cook.

A few nights before she'd read an article from a woman's magazine to Jin Yu.

'Black magic is dangerous and can destroy your health. It can also kill or make the individual commit suicide in extreme cases.'

'That's rubbish! I don't believe in black magic.'

'Many people are victims of black magic, suffering from prolonged and even fatal illnesses but they have no idea that black magic is the cause. If you think you've become a victim of black magic answer these questions.'

She'd narrowed her eyes and tilted her head, leaning so close to his face that he could feel her breath on his cheek.

'Is your sleep disturbed? Is your mouth dry at night? Do you feel fatigued and lacking in energy? Do you get angry for no reason? Do you suffer from obesity?'

He'd stopped her, 'Don't Mandy, I can answer yes to them all, it doesn't signify, and who'd want to do black magic on me anyway?'

'Padma! Maybe she has a black magic doll; a Chinaman, stuck with pins hidden in her room, or maybe she has your baby.'

'Shut up!'

'Have you ever had sex with her?'

'What? Are you mad?'

He had pinned her arms down on the bed, glaring at her before kissing her. He'd told her to forget Padma.

And yet the next morning there she was, stepping through the doorway, peering into Padma's bedroom to satisfy her curiosity. The room was just big enough for the single camp bed. It had a rough concrete floor and iron bars instead of glass in the window. And right outside, shutting out the view and light was a massive air conditioning unit droning away like a lawn mower. Her clothes were hung from nails on the wall, and on the windowsill stood a plaster statuette of Lakshmi goddess of wealth, and a packet of mosquito coils.

Later that day Jin Yu arrived home; his head ached and his neck hurt. He wanted to put on his surgical collar and rest but she wouldn't let him wear it, she said it made him look like an old cripple. He'd told her he had cervicalgia, so she'd made him do yoga. He hadn't been able to do it right, and she'd sat on his back pressing his chest to his knees; twisting his arms behind his shoulders. He believed she'd nearly broken his back and he'd been in excruciating pain for days afterwards. From then on he'd kept quiet, afraid of being made to do yoga again.

‘Why don’t we stay in tonight?’ he asked, ‘I’ll send Osman to pick up a dinner.’

‘Fine.’

She waited and watched him take his jacket and tie off, then she launched on him, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself! I looked inside Padma’s room today, and it’s worse than a prison cell. Are you sure it’s meant to be a bedroom and not the broom cupboard?’

‘She’s a servant.’

‘What? Are you afraid she might get above herself? What about the huge room where you keep the Hoover and the bloody mop? Why can’t she have that?’

He reddened, ‘I have no idea. It’s not something I organised myself.’

Mandy pointed at him as though it were all his fault, ‘And she doesn’t even have a wardrobe! Her clothes are hung on nails. And you couldn’t even fit a wardrobe in the room anyway. If I were you, I’d be ashamed to keep a servant in such a condition.’

‘I’ll have to talk to my brother about it.’

Jin Yu knew he would have to tread carefully or Mandy would start a row; like when she’d first arrived and caused trouble over Sinbad the dog.

Years before, Han Yu had bought Sinbad from a breeder in Singapore.

‘We need a guard dog,’ he’d told Jin Yu, ‘Alsations are ideal because of their strength, intelligence and obedience training.’

Yet when anyone returned home, Sinbad would jump on them from excitement, covering their clothes and the car door in mud and dust. He had no malice in him and Han Yu said he’d never bite a burglar. He was kept chained to his kennel in the day and let loose at night.

‘He’ll ruin my suit lah.’

Over the years everyone had forgotten him, he spent his days laying in the yard and his back legs had become riddled with arthritis.

A few days after her arrival, Mandy had come across Sinbad while wandering through the gardens. Lying in the shade, his long snout resting on his paws, she’d knelt down on her knees and lowered her head to peer into his eyes. Sighing deeply, feeling his dejection seeping into her she’d rubbed at the dirt on his neck, revealing the bright orange and ginger tips of his dark fur.

Jin Yu had come home to find the dog lying on the leather sofa and he’d noticed Mandy was using his hairbrush to groom Sinbad. He’d stood there watching her, confused by the sweet look of love in her eyes; a love that rose around her like damp earth and dog sweat, a love he longed to be wrapped in, a love she withheld from him. He knew if he ordered Sinbad back outside Mandy would leave. She might be living under his roof but was more like a bird that had flown in through the window by chance, and she’d fly off again unless he could shut the window first.

He’d lied to her, ‘I had no idea he was chained up. It’s the servants, stupid duffers! They’re ignorant, they’ve no idea how to treat a dog.’

Thinking of what Han Yu would say when he came home and found

the dog on the sofa, he added, 'I think Sinbad would be happier if he stayed on our side of the house.'

After that he'd come home every day to find the dog in his rooms, sprawled on the carpet in his study and on the bed at night lying between them. Sinbad seemed to have taken to the life of relaxing, only going into the garden for a crap. Mandy had no thoughts of exercising him with long walks; she'd tried to get him in the pool but he'd been too afraid.

At the office his brother had noted dryly that Mandy treated the dog like her child.

'Anyway what is she? Amoi or Bohsia?' girlfriend or slut?

Jin Yu had said nothing. How could he answer, he didn't know himself. He wished he could say Wife, Pu-ngiong.

He'd taken Mandy away to Hong Kong for a few days. They went shopping for books and he'd bought her a new camera. While they were there, he'd telephoned Han Yu to ask a favour. Han Yu didn't want the dog in the house, she wouldn't leave him in the garden and Jin Yu didn't want him in their bed.

'Can't you send the dog back?'

'Don't be an idiot Lah!'

'Then take it to Auntie's!'

'Cannot Meh!'

In the end Han Yu had said he wouldn't object to Sinbad being taken away, but refused to have anything to do with it. So Jin Yu had made a phone call to his driver and he'd sent the dog to a bungalow on one of their rubber estates.

Back in Ipoh, he'd told Mandy, 'Sinbad died from a heart attack while we were in Hong Kong. I didn't tell you straight away, because I didn't want you to be sad.'

Now with Sinbad gone she was taking up with Padma. He felt a forewarning. He couldn't move Padma to a larger room, it would be wrong. His brother's wife Sue Chin was in charge of domestic arrangements and the younger brother's girlfriend shouldn't interfere. Jin Yu knew he couldn't say any of this to Mandy, she wouldn't understand or even try to comprehend, she'd put them on trial for being feudal and backward.

'Why let your brother organise everything?' she complained, 'It's your house too! It's time you stood up for Padma, poor cow. And double her wages or triple them, so she can buy some decent clothes.'

'I can't interfere.' he told her, 'It's not my place. He's my older brother.'

'Older brother? He looks old enough to be your father.'

He felt deeply ashamed by what she said, and wanted her to shut her beautiful gob.

'I'll see what I can do.' he said.

Chinese endeavour to preserve face and avoid shame in public and private. Face is a notion that includes a good name, good character, and being held in high regard. Face is

considered an asset that can be earned or lost.

Face is lost when openly criticizing or confronting someone in authority; also by refusing a request, not keeping a promise, or disagreeing with someone in public. On the other hand, face can be saved by remaining courteous, and discussing transgressions in private without blaming anyone.

Chinese will never refuse a request by saying 'No' Instead they will say 'I will try' or 'I'll see what I can do' This allows the person, whose request is turned down, to save face and withdraw with their pride intact."

Chinese Customs - Harold Kim 1905

Jin Yu stood alone in his study, he had no intention of talking to Han Yu about Padma. He disliked Padma, he wanted nothing to do with her and neither did any one else, except Mandy.

'Leave Padma alone, let her do her job!' he could see himself telling her.

Then she would say, 'No, I want to take her shopping, and I'm going to buy her a pair of shoes.'

He'd take hold of her hair, caressing it at first, 'No you wont!' pulling a little tighter.

'Yes' she would say, 'and I'm going to give her my red and gold sari.'

'No you are not!' He'd rip open her blouse, the pearl buttons scattering on the floor.

'You'll do as I say.' He would stroke her bare breasts, her nipples growing hard.

'I'm going to punish you, until you learn to obey me.'

She'd whisper, 'I wont.'

And then he would pull up her skirt and pull down her knickers.

'Say you're sorry.'

'I'm not sorry, never!' She would laugh at him, and he'd bend her over the desk.

'Then I'll cane you. I'll teach you. You'll learn who is your master.'

Then he would take the silver topped rattan cane from the shelf and whip her bare bottom.

He raced back to the bedroom his heart thudding in his chest. Mandy was there reading a book, lying on the opium bed oblivious to the tempest she was causing in his head.

She looked up and asked him, 'So have you spoken with your brother?'

She just wouldn't shut up. He snatched the book from her and flung it across the room, it crashed against the wall. Her eyes widened in shock, then she noticed his hard penis pressing against his trousers. She slowly crawled across the pillows. He knelt behind her and pushed up her skirt, her hair fell forwards covering her face and he bit the back of her neck.

Later, lying next to her he marvelled at how much he loved her. She made him angry and he loved her even more. She leant on one elbow looking down on him.

She asked him, 'What about Padma?'

Her mouth had become petulant. Jin Yu didn't have the energy to imagine caning her anymore, he just wanted to appease her.



He told her, 'I must find the right moment, he was with Sue Chin and the baby.'

'So?' she demanded.

'I can't make a criticism in front of his wife.'

The following day Jin Yu left the house before dawn. He had to visit several tin mines before a business meeting. He was tired and worried about Mandy; she'd told him she wanted to come with him to photograph the mineworkers, so he'd sneaked away.

He didn't want her with him. He had no time to keep stopping at every other hawker stall, nor to hang around while she took photographs of everything. He would feel ashamed going to the mines with a woman. He was there to sort out some disputes and her presence would be a mockery. The mineworkers would judge her from the corners of their eyes and they would not be proud to be photographed; their bodies stiffened, frozen to the spot, humiliated to be standing in their grimy work clothes.

He stumbled out of the car and into the early morning air. The sinking moon glowed like a far off lantern in the purple sky. He hated being there that day; when he knew the price of tin would slump by half the following year. The miners floated around him in a bluish mist, eyes flashing in the darkness, their stuttered words sharp like teeth. All smiles, he walked around shaking hands and nodding. Many of them would be sacked sooner or later. Seeing their knotted faces that day saddened him so that he felt physically ill.

'Keep silent for now.' Han Yu had told him. 'Set the wheels in motion and diversify lah!'

'Taken care of.'

There under the rising sun Phang Jin Yu felt vicious and unheroic. The sun's red rays flew like arrows out of the black jungle, burning a searing vision of himself as a soft white larva feeding on the tiny ant miners; a myrmecophagous caterpillar secreting a pheromone that made the ants believe he was one of their own. They carried him into their nests where he fed on their children, their tiny bodies crunchy and tasting bitter. He bit into their poison sacks turning his spit red hot.

He stood there in the middle of the jungle hills imprisoned by tall barbed wire fences; he spat on the ground. He squeezed his eyes against the rising sun and saw the miner's bodies worn and hard as rock; dry skin like old mottled leather, their legs nothing but bone and knotted veins still carrying their life blood, still hauling tin from the ground while they shrivelled in the hot sun.

He believed he'd be glad when the end came; once the mines were abandoned, the gigantic machines would blossom into furry rust as orange as a low sun. The jungle would weave a beautiful dappled canopy over the tired iron carcasses; entwining with the barbed wire fences, reclaiming its land.

*"An overview of reclamation and rehabilitation of tin mining land.  
The environmental damage caused by mining and creation of barren wastelands is due in part to the stripping of large areas of vegetation to allow access to tin mining machineries. Subsequently soil erosion occurs and the formation of mining pools. These contain large amounts of tailings left behind by alluvial mining, which have been completely leached of most plant nutrients and therefore unable to support any life forms. Areas like these become polluted wasteland. Crops cultivated on tin tailings have been found to contain Toxic elements (appendix A) Tailings washed into rivers cause high toxicity levels rendering the water unsuitable for drinking and irrigation purposes (appendix B) Restoration work: Mining holes can be filled with non-poisonous waste or large mining pools which have already formed may be converted into lakes or ponds for recreational use . . ."*

In the back of his car returning to Ipoh, he opened the file for a golf resort to be built on one of their disused mines in East Perak. The geological report made him feel doomed and he pushed it back into the folder, glad that Mandy wasn't there to read about environmental damage. Instead, he unfolded the construction plans for an emerald green golf course dotted with turquoise lakes.

He arrived in Ipoh, and went to a hotel restaurant to have lunch with a man from the United Moslems National Organisation. The man beamed at Jin Yu, his teeth blazing white he smiled and talked with his mouth full:

'Grease our palms. Give us kick back. Nice percentage lah.'

Jin Yu slid an envelope across the table, he murmured:

'As we agreed.'

The man shoved the envelope in his pocket fast, and snorted:

'Thanks lah! Contract's yours. Done and dusted.'

Jin Yu felt sick and he hardly touched his food. The man stuffed himself in a hurry then guzzled the wine down. He burped and asked Jin Yu:

'You're paying right? What about the suite? And where's the girl?'

Jin Yu had it all laid on. He said:

'I told her to wait for you in the room, and not to come down here.'

'Nah,' the man shrugged, 'no worry about the waiters chitter chatting; they know to keep their traps shut in high-class hotels.'

Jin Yu shook hands and said goodbye to the man, his oily lips smiled back, and then Jin Yu left him there.

Later back at the office, he wondered whether he should say something about Padma's room. 'Mandy thinks it's a rabbit's hutch' but when Han Yu came by in the afternoon he kept quiet.

Han Yu asked:

'All sorted with the contract?'

'Yes.' Jin Yu told him.

At the end of the day his driver arrived, and on their way home Osman reminded him:

'Lady Madam, she say you bring steam dumpling for dinner.'

They stopped outside a restaurant and Jin Yu waited in the car.

He just wanted to rest when he got home but he was afraid he might find Padma in his bedroom; an awful picture came to his mind of Padma wearing one of Mandy's dresses. Mandy would have cut off Padma's long oily plaits and restyled her hair using his brush, which would smell forever more of dog and coconut oil. She would have painted Padma's face and lectured her on feminism, she'd then want Jin Yu to enrol Padma in a secretarial college and pay for her typing course, which he'd have to get out of because Padma couldn't even read or write. The written word for Padma was just scribble; but if Mandy knew that, she'd want to spend every night teaching Padma the alphabet, naturally in Roman letters. Mandy would probably improve Padma's Pidgin English by recording a tape with repeat phrases like, 'I am a dog. You are a dog. He is a dog.' And she'd give it to Padma to listen to, using his Walkman so Padma could learn while sleeping.

Osman came back with a bag full of steaming hot food and drove Jin Yu back home.

\*

Mandy sat at the dressing table mirror snapping stalks off a pile of freshly cut flowers. The broken stems exuded a sharp fragrance that wafted across the room and as the sticky sap ran down her fingers she wiped her hands on her hot thighs. Jin Yu sat on the end of the bed reading a newspaper.

### **KL Times** May 3<sup>rd</sup>

"Kuala Lumpur- The Home Ministry has issued a communication stating that it will not renew Kejujuran's publishing permit, which expires on Thursday as it was not satisfied with the paper's explanation for allegedly printing inaccurate reports.

Kejujuran, the main opposition party's English language newspaper, run by opposition MJP leader Ahmed Hussein, was closed today after the authorities said it violated publishing laws by printing several reports last month that claimed embezzlement and corruption by certain key government ministers.

Chung Hoi Fat, Kejujuran deputy editor and Malaysian Justice Party MP for Tipah told the KL times 'I am shocked. This is not an isolated incident, the government is cracking down on dissent and freedom of the press.' He also cited the recent decision to ban a popular political TV show, and added 'With or without our

newspaper, we will spread the truth.’ ”

Remembering Hoi Fat’s rude article about him, Jin Yu gloated at first but then he felt bad and bemoaned instead the loss of free speech.

‘Censor us, gag us and make us wear blinkers.’ He sighed as he watched Mandy gather her long hair up in her hands, twisting it into a golden beehive like a crown upon her head.

She frowned at him in the mirror, ‘What are you going on about?’

‘They’re shutting down the opposition’s newspaper.’

‘So what? Who cares?’

She shrugged and began to pin sweet white orchid flowers into her yellow hair, weaving a diadem of such loveliness that in his eyes she no longer seemed earthly but had become as beautiful as the moon. Jin Yu threw the paper down on the bed and strode over to her; he gripped her shoulders, intoxicated by the scents.

‘Don’t!’ she said, ‘you may mess my hair up later. First let me finish, and then I want you to take a photo of me naked, with just these flowers in my hair.’

Blood pounded in his ears and he sat back down to wait. He began to sort through his mail, saving a large cream coloured envelope until last; it was an invitation to his old school’s annual theatre event. He sighed again because Han Yu would be away in Canada and he knew he’d have to go in his place.

Jin Yu’s great uncle Foo Chock had started the tradition, and each year his family gave a scholarship to the most promising thespian. As a young boy Foo Chock had run away to Hong Kong to join the stage; claiming he’d found inspiration playing the lead role in a school play. He’d passed years acting bit parts in silent movies and spending nights on stage; waiting behind mildewed velvet curtains until they creaked open, and then the crowds had roared and jeered as he’d sweated under the lights. In the end he’d given up and come home to work in the family business, yet somehow he’d remained undefeated. He’d told everyone he was a resting actor, and in all the old family photographs he was recognisable as Rudolph Valentino. He’d even had his hair styled in the same manner and drawn his eyebrows like Valentino in the Sheik.

Jin Yu wanted to take Mandy with him to the school play; he wanted to show her off to the old boys and their wives. He told her she could choose the winner of the Phang Foo Chock award but she wouldn’t go.

She told him, ‘I hate boring old plays acted by school kids!’

The following Saturday evening Jin Yu drove across Ipoh to his old school. He chose a seat furthest from the stage and sat alone feeling hacked off and weary until the play was finished. After, he handed over the Thespians cup and cheque and then headed for the garden buffet. School plays always took place at dinnertime. Amidst the plates piled high with delicious food stood a beautiful solid silver punch bowl, it had been donated to the school in 1910 by the Sultan of Perak and was now filled

with a potent golden cocktail.

Phang Jin Yu was soon dead drunk.

‘How can we win the bloody elections when we no longer have a goddamn newspaper of our own?’

Jin Yu turned round to see who’d spoken and saw Chung Hoi Fat.

He smirked at Jin Yu:

‘Sorry mate, I mean, old boy. Must keep the old stiff upper lip, what?’

He knocked back a glassful of punch and raised his thick eyebrows at Jin Yu. Feeling challenged Jin Yu followed suit, he tipped up his own glass and drank down the syrupy liquor. Hoi Fat started laughing at him but looked ready to cry, and Jin Yu became alarmed. He tried to turn his back on Hoi Fat and walk away, however he was stuck. Bending forwards he stared down at his short legs and shiny shoes, he felt as though his feet were glued to the ground and realised he was too pissed to run away.

He had to stay and face a crying man who jeered him:

‘Look at you! Phang Jin Yu, evil landlord and what else? Are you afraid to drink? Afraid you might give yourself away?’

Jin Yu tried to defend himself with words, but his vocal chords were swamped in a sweet slime.

Hoi Fat stepped closer, wavering on his feet, and told him:

‘Old boy, do you want me to bloody apologise? Because I won’t!’

Fat took another glass of punch and several deep swigs. Then he tilted forward, a heave came charging up from his guts and he vomited on Jin Yu.

Later inside the school’s toilets Jin Yu found himself clinging to a basin with his head stuck under the tap. His brains smouldered as cold water poured over his head. Feeling numb and senseless he tried to straighten up, searching for himself in the mirror. He could see nothing but thick mist. He rubbed his eyes, thinking himself blinded by the vomit. Then he opened them again to a florescent light that spread like the sun breaking through the clouds. There were bean size drops of water rolling down his forehead.

Jin Yu’s voice slurred and shushed as he spoke to himself in the mirror:

‘The school director Brother Francis apologised to me, he said it was unfortunate. He sang my family’s praises. He wanted me to know the school is grateful for the thespians scholarship.’

Jin Yu saw Hoi Fat behind him reflected in the mirror; he was sitting on a toilet seat with the cubicle door open.

Jin Yu carried on, his voice rising:

‘Whereas Brother Francis always felt you were a problematic child and has asked me to turn the other cheek.’

Jin Yu tried to focus on Hoi Fat but could only see a Hsigo monkey perched on the toilet wagging its tail, its huge agate eyes blinking at him. The aroma of sick wafted around Jin Yu as he struggled to pull his shirt off. He started to rinse it under the running water when Hoi Fat snatched it away and used it to wipe up the vomit he’d thrown up on the toilet floor.

‘I’ll buy you a new one, Turnball & Assar, not to fucking worry.’ He told

Jin Yu while he mopped up.

Jin Yu whined:

'But I can't walk out of here like this!' he'd left his jacket in the car.

Hoi Fat shrugged:

'Neither can I, Brother Francis has not been so kind; he told me to shut my filthy mouth and rinse it out with soap and if he sees me again he'll knock out my teeth. I daren't go back outside.'

Jin Yu accused:

'You have ruined my evening and destroyed my shirt.'

'Do you want to reduce me to tears again?' Fat dabbed his dry eyes, 'Better not start on recriminations.'

Jin Yu shook his head:

'Thanks to you I'm half naked and stuck in a toilet.'

'The wise man adapts himself to circumstances,' Fat scoffed, 'lets get out through the window.'

Jin Yu gazed in dismay as Hoi Fat transformed himself into a Hsigo monkey. Flapping his feathered wings, Hoi Fat rose into the air and flew away out into the night. Jin Yu heaved and scrambled up after him, his bare stomach scratching on the window frame. Not to be seen, they crept low across the playing fields until they reached the boundary. Then Hoi Fat flew over the wall, his feet pedalling while his feathered wings beat gently.

Jin Yu struggled up behind Hoi Fat and from the top of the wall he watched him fly down to the other side. Hoi Fat landed silently, his wings arching, he looked up at Jin Yu:

'Did you see that old boy? That's nothing, my leader Ahmed Hussein can fly from Hong Kong to London without a stopover'

Jin Yu fell on the hard turf.

Hoi Fat sniggered:

'Well old boy, do you believe your own eyes? Or are you blind drunk?

It started raining as he followed Hoi Fat through the dark streets. Rain poured down his face like tears, the heavy oily drops trickled down his back cooling his sweaty skin. They walked on; crossing roads like rivers, and floating rubbish like paper boats sped on the current ending washed up in the drains.

Jin Yu complained:

'You shouldn't have dragged me in, it's none of my business!'

They were standing under the rusty iron roof sheets at the deserted bus stand. Hoi Fat took off his rain soaked shirt, wringing it into a tight ball. Jin Yu saw he had a flying blue dragon tattooed on his chest

Hoi Fat scowled at him:

'You are in. We're all in, and you can't get out. You'll have to fight.'

Hoi Fat shook his shirt open, flapping it like washing in the wind as he began to duck and weave dancing around Jin Yu, whipping the shirt at him, light as a swallow, darting close to his cheeks, his ears, his bare chest, grazing him with sharp cool caresses.

He grinned at Jin Yu and told him:

'I'm sure you're dying to know how I've become a master of dexterity

and prowess. But what's the use of me telling you? To be truthful you seem content to live your life as a donkey, so there is nothing you can learn.'

Then Hoi Fat draped his shirt over his back like a cloak, and through the wet cloth his shoulder blades stuck out like severed wings. Jin Yu wondered how he came to be standing in the cold rain on a spring night with Hoi Fat. A neon sign hung above them, it kept changing colour, turning them orange then blue then orange, over and over; their skin flickering and changing hue as Fat's dragon pulsated a fiery red and inky blue on his chest.

Jin Yu swallowed back the juices from his rumbling gut and accused Hoi Fat:

'First you are a wily politik, then you're a Hsigo hero who flies like a shadow and now you're a boxer clowning around a donkey. You're a concoction of myth and deception!'

'With me or against me! Make up your mind, wait too long and I might get killed!'

Hoi Fat lit a cigarette. He puffed a cloud of smoke in Jin Yu's face, then he pulled a fish face, puckering his lips he blew a smoke ring that hung in the wet air between them.

He declared:

'Everything I wrote is the truth, I Chung Hoi Fat do not make stuff up! That's your line, I believe you are the storyteller.'

They walked on again until they reached Hoi Fat's house; at the gate he told Jin Yu:

'I'll give you a shirt which will be too tight to button, and an umbrella big enough to keep you dry. Follow me.'

Inside the hall a murky chandelier cast a greyish glow that was neither dark nor light. Jin Yu's eyeballs were dull and heavy and his mouth dry. A strangled cry escaped from Hoi Fat as another light flicked on revealing a ransacked room. Through the doorway Jin Yu saw an overturned desk, draws spewing torn papers and books, shelves emptied and their contents trashed on the floor. Jin Yu stepped into the room, crunching broken porcelain under his shoes. He stood there stripped to the waist, his man breasts shining with sweat and rain water. He could hear a muffled cry from Hoi Fat back in the hallway.

'Puss Puss Puss.'

Jin Yu followed the call to the bathroom and there he found Hoi Fat standing in front of the toilet bowl; above him, hung a furry black creature impaled to the wall by a keris dagger.

He whispered to Hoi Fat:

'What's happened? Is that a dead monkey or something?'

'It's not a monkey, you thicketo, you stupid fat sea cow. It's a black cat.'

Jin Yu struggled to see clearly in the throbbing light. Pierced through the neck was a furry pelt emptied of its flesh. He took a step closer, peering at the offal splattered round the bowl. Hoi Fat pulled the chain and the toilet flushed and gurgled.

He faced Jin Yu:

'Do you know what my cat's name was?'

Jin Yu shook his head and Hoi Fat told him:

'Pinky, it was Pinky.'

Jin Yu stood watching Hoi Fat as he loosened the dagger; a sad man with ice fresh cheeks, his torso glowing as if moulded in goose fat and his flying dragon chest tattoo faded like watery ink. He held his dead cat Pinky suspended before them and Jin Yu looked away. Fat closed the seat and gently laid the cat down on the toilet lid; his hand trembled as he softly caressed Pinky's glistening black fur, smearing his fingers with blood. He looked at Jin Yu, his eyes like shiny glass, and held out the dagger to him; there were lumps of catgut stuck to its wavy blade. Jin Yu was unable to move, he knew he couldn't take it from him, couldn't touch the sticky wet handle, and he watched as Hoi Fat threw the dagger in the washbasin.

'What does it mean?'

'It means, just give us the name of this muckraker and we'll smash his house up!'

Jin Yu felt his blood draining away and a roaring in his ears, they stood there staring at each other.

Hoi Fat stepped out into the hall and bellowed:

'Samat! Samat!'

Jin Yu followed him, he could see someone down the end of the corridor peeping through the crack in the doorway.

'Sorry Mr Fat, one moment please.' a cheery voice called from the other side of the door.

A skinny boy walked into the hall wearing a massive striped sarong that trailed behind him like a wedding dress train. He took a quick look at the ransacked room and sighed:

'My what has happened here? Most unfortunate incident!'

'Fuck off Samat! You're saying you know nothing?' Fat gasped.

'I was in bed, I sleep deeply.' Samat shrugged, 'Sorry, never heard a dicky bird.'

Samat stared at Jin Yu's bare torso, a grin frozen on his shiny dark face.

'He was sick on my shirt.' he told Samat, pointing at Hoi Fat.

He ignored Jin Yu, and followed Hoi Fat into the study. They stood scanning the overturned furniture and broken china and Samat picked up a china fragment from the carpet.

'Ahh what have we here?' he asked.

Hoi Fat glowered:

'Ming, a Cheng Hua stem cup, or was.'

'Ah yes! Now I recognise it, maybe I can glue it back together.'

Hoi Fat snatched the piece of broken cup from Samat and barked:

'Where's Dumb Girl? Bring her here right now, she must have heard something.'

'How can? She's deaf.'

'Well seen something then.' Fat jabbed his finger, 'She has eyes, so go and find her.'

Samat stomped out of the room, his sarong trailing over the debris



across the floor behind him.

'Who the hell is Dumb Girl?' Jin Yu wondered.

'Do you want the long version or the short?' Fat picked up a couple of overturned chairs. 'Sit down and I'll tell you.'

'Keep it brief.' Jin Yu told him.

'Well, it's a long story, my uncle's wife found her on some rubber plantation after the war. She was a deaf dumb orphan so Short Auntie took her home to look after her kids.'

Hoi Fat leant forward resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, he pursed his lips trying to remember. 'She must have been about twelve. Anyway by the time my cousins were grown up, she'd become a permanent fixture, a tyrant, a sort of boss over the other servants. Short Auntie kept bottles of tap water in the fridge, but Dumb Girl made the servants drink the tepid stuff straight from the faucet, and turned the water off if they stayed too long in the shower.' Fat giggled, 'I remember, once Short Auntie gave her a pair of spectacles from the Christian blind mission, and she stamped on them because they were ugly. She did a lot of sewing for the family and in the end they had to take her to an opticians and get her a pair with gold sparkly frames.'

'So how come you have her now?'

Hoi Fat chuckled to himself as Samat came back in the room followed by Dumb Girl. Fat stood up and shrugged:

'My father took her in when Short Auntie kicked the bucket, the cousins don't want her and Fat Auntie said she'd no room.' He pointed a bony finger at Samat and Dumb Girl. 'Samat was part of the deal, he's the only one who can understand her sign language, or at least he pretends. Anyway in the end I inherited the both of them.'

'She was hiding in the outhouse.' Samat announced poking Dumb Girl who let out a sharp squeal. She was short and wide with a huge gut, her iron grey hair, dyed jet black in patches was pulled back in a bun and her huge eyes peered at them from behind a pair of diamante wing glasses. She reminded Jin Yu of a toad. She was wearing a shiny black dress trimmed with ruffles of gold lace and a pair of old rubber flip flops.

'Ask her what happened?' demanded Hoi Fat.

Samat made a few waves and hand chops in the air and poked the ripped books with the toe of his black slipper.

Dumb girl grunted:

'Ughh, ughh, ooogh,' she covered her face with her hands then peeped out between her grimy fingers, 'eeh, eeeh.' she then crept about the room chucking invisible objects through the air, 'ahhh ahhh haaa haaa' she cackled with glee, looked left then right and touched her nose and patted the top of her head.

'Cant say just yet, seems it was likely a band of serial robbers.' Samat suggested.

Hoi Fat gasped suffocating like a fish:

'How can? Thieves have smashed up everything of value!'

Dumb girl was now ripping pages from imaginary books and kicking

them about the room.

Samat sneered:

'Maybe they didn't find what they were looking for? Maybe they got angry?'

Dumb girl threw up her hands and began slapping at the empty air, her palms were red and shiny. She punched her fist in Hoi Fat's direction then straddled an invisible motorbike, revving the engine while turning the handlebars.

'Rrrrrmmm Rrrrrmmmm' she yelled over and over.

Samat bellowed over the racket:

'She say it was a band of thieves, like those Mat Rockers. You know the ones, with the leather jackets, mopeds, long hair, scruffy and all that?'

'What the fuck?'

'Yes sir! Most likely, they hate books and writings.' Samat kicked the torn book pages across the carpet.

Hoi Fat clapped his hands together, he snorted loudly:

'Bullshit, now lets see what the mad bat has to say about the bathroom.'

Samat pulled Dumb girl off her motorbike, then gripping her shoulders with both hands he pushed her past Hoi Fat and into the hall.

Hoi Fat ordered:

'Stop! Me first!'

He elbowed Samat to one side, and charged along the hall into the bathroom and skidded to a stop at the toilet.

'Right!' Fat hollered, 'This better be good or you're both fired.'

Dumb Girl tiptoed in and ripped back the shower curtain, she grabbed at an invisible being inside the stall and held it aloft screeching in pain:

'Awww Agh Ahhh Awwwh.'

She flung whatever she held in her hands against the wall, drew an imaginary dagger and stabbed it. She stepped back and began rubbing her arms and emitting sharp hisses as she touched her invisible wounds:

'Ssssss, sssshhh, sssshhh.'

She crept closer to the toilet and picked up the dead cat by its tail, she tutted before throwing it on the floor. Then she mimed winding a turban around her head and began a sword fight with an imaginary foe, she suddenly stopped, stood still and drew a large square in the air framing her face.

'Got it!' Samat gleamed at Dumb Girl, and signalled her to stop. 'This band of robbers are copying that old Hang Tuah film from the TV. Nasty business. Of course these robbers are just a bunch of copycats!'

'Rubbish!' Fat barked, 'I've always been good at charades; it looks like Pinky ran in the shower to hide and scratched who ever found him, they lost their temper and the results are obvious.'

'No Sir! She says they copied it from the TV. Remember when the evil leader slaughtered a tiger after the robbery? Cats are small tigers, get it? Hang Tuah caught him but Taming Sari escaped in a puff of smoke.' Samat pointed at Dumb Girl, 'Television.'

Samat drew a large square in the air framing himself and Dumb Girl did the same, then she began running about the bathroom as though trying to catch a mouse

'Eegh, eeegh.' Dumb Girl squealed.

Samat sighed:

'She says not easy to apprehend these thieves, very slippery rascals.' He wiped his sweaty brow on his shirtsleeve, 'Best leave her alone to clear up the mess. I'm sorry for your loss.'

He leapt over the dead cat skidding on the tiles and came to a halt in the doorway. He turned to Jin Yu:

'Would you like me to call you a taxi?'

Then he slunk out sniggering through the hallway, and was gone leaving Hoi Fat and Jin Yu alone in the bathroom with Dumb Girl.

Hoi Fat spat:

'Do I look like a fool who believes in Hang Tuah and fairy stories?'

Jin Yu shrugged, spying a towel he wrapped it round his weary torso, he sighed:

'No of course you don't.'

Jin Yu arrived home later that night; bent low in the rain he crept past the security guard's hut like a beggar in a soaked shawl and rushed through the front door slamming it hard behind him.

\*

The air was hot and steamy; Mandy had turned off the air conditioning and was standing in the kitchen in her bikini pants. She was peering into a glass bowl, slowly stirring its contents. The kitchen table was covered with broken eggshells and flour. Jin Yu looked round for Padma, she wasn't there and her bedroom door was shut.

He asked:

'What are you doing?'

'Baking a chocolate cake.' She carefully poured a paper cone of cocoa powder over the bowl waving it in circles.

He watched in amazement as she picked up a whisk; holding it with tenacity and grace, a twitch of her fine wrist testing its force and whipping power. She had the airs of a married woman.

He smiled:

'Mandy leave that. I'll send for a really good chocolate cake from the best bakers in Ipoh.'

She looked mad and beautiful standing there in the half dark kitchen. Almost savagely she beat the eggs, flour and cocoa; sending them flying. He stood mesmerised by her little tits jiggling as she whisked faster and faster.

He said:

'Please stop,'

'Why? Are you worried about the mess?'

They looked at each other across the shadowy kitchen. She was

glistening with sweat.

‘Padma can clean it up.’

‘OK...’

She let the bowl slide from her grasp, it landed upside down and the chocolate concoction trickled on the floor. She stepped over it and followed Jin Yu to the bedroom.

He whispered:

‘I’ll help you wash.’

Later Jin Yu returned to the kitchen, silently padding bare foot across the tiles. He called for Padma. She opened the door to her room and stepped outside. His jaw dropped, he was dismayed by the sight of her. She was a monstrosity; her eyes were swollen like red grapes, and her face was streaky with dirt and dried tear tracks. Jin Yu could not help but look beyond her into the cell; he saw that Mandy had told him the truth and he felt pained.

‘Clean the kitchen quickly leh.’

Jin Yu returned to the bedroom, he had decided to take action at last. He stood proud and made the announcement to Mandy while she painted her toenails.

‘You are right. I’ve decided to do something about Padma. We must help her, and I want to do what is right.’

He could smooth things over with Han Yu and his wife. Just tell them it was Mandy’s little project. You know, to stop her getting bored.

She frowned:

‘What’s wrong with bloody Padma?’

‘What? You said she needed help; she has been crying.’

‘Serves her right, sulky bitch.’

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing! I wanted to take her shopping for food and I was going to give her a cookery lesson.’ Mandy’s eyes narrowed, ‘She refused to get in the car so I went by myself. When I got back I wanted to bake a cake for you and she just stood there staring at me with her stupid ugly cow’s eyes. She didn’t even smile when I gave her some fruit, so I told her to fuck off to her room. End of!’

‘Did you lose your temper?’

‘Yes and so what?’

‘Is that why you made all the mess in the kitchen? To get your own back?’

‘I don’t care. I don’t want to talk about bloody Padma anymore. Shut up, it’s boring me.’

Jin Yu knew Padma had strict instructions not to leave the compound except on her day off. He could see Padma refusing to get in the car; she would have stood there like a stubborn mule, shaking her head and saying nothing. She wouldn’t have dared to take a ride in the car; not without being ordered to by his elder brother or by him, but never by the concubine.

姬 *Hi Ki woman concubine, female entertainer, beautiful lady, charming girl* or 孀 *mistress concubine weak.*

Jin Yu stood watching her and felt exasperated. He saw her as a young girl, spoilt and capricious, clever and bad tempered. He would have to teach her slowly. Sometimes he thought she'd never understand him. He couldn't see she didn't love him yet, couldn't see it was too soon. He only knew with certainty that he would be all she needed; he'd be someone sacred to her, a husband, and a father figure.

He told her:

'Mandy, what you did was wrong. You have shamed yourself. Padma is not important but you must respect her. Your position is to be kind but not her friend.' He leaned over her, 'You stood in the kitchen cooking, that is her job, and without wearing your bikini top; she is a Hindu and you know that your behaviour for her is shocking. She will think you are very bad and now you have scolded her.'

She stood up and shrugged:

'Who cares?'

'I do.' He told her.

'Why? You don't even like her!'

'Listen, you cannot say fuck off to the servants! If anyone displeases you, you must talk to me first and then I will decide what's to be done. You lost your temper like a child.'

She turned away from him and whispered:

'I don't give a damn.'

Her wounded pride stung, burning her face a deep red, but the truth in his words cut her; her eyes welled up with tears. Straight away he regretted what he'd just said.

'Please Mandy, I'm sorry, don't cry. I love you so much.'

Jin Yu put his arms around her and pulled her to him, she smelt of flowers and chocolate. As he breathed in the scent of her he felt afraid; this was the first time he'd ever made her cry. Until now, only the maimed dogs in the streets would make tears seep from under her lashes. Now he believed her tears were for him at last.

He told her:

'Mandy don't be sad. I want to look after you, and take care of you forever. I'll build a house for you.'

She rested on his shoulder. He sighed deeply knowing he should wait. Yet he couldn't wait, he'd waited too long.

'I want to marry you.'

'OK.'

Jin Yu held her tight, she belonged to him now. She didn't know the joy in his heart. She never realised in that moment how deep his feelings ran. She didn't know why she'd said yes and she didn't want to know why.

That night in bed, he lay bold and naked beside her. He believed he'd be her teacher, her daddy.

She said to him:

'Tell me a story.'

Once upon a time, long long ago, there was a poor orphaned boy. When his parents died he'd been forced to live with his elder brother and his elder brother's wife. His elder brother had inherited the house and all the farmland, and being cruel and selfish he only gave the younger brother a very ancient and decrepit ox.

Every day he was sent with his ox to toil for long hours ploughing the fields. In the evening when he returned to the farmhouse tired and hungry, he would wait for his brother's wife to chuck the rancid stale scraps from their leftover dinner out into the yard for him to eat. His brother's wife was a sour woman, as ugly as hell with gimlet eyes and evil smelling breath; she hated him and so he was banished from the house and had no choice but to sleep in the pigsty at night. This revolting food and the piss soaked straw floor he slept upon, were his only payment for the long hours he passed ploughing his brother's fields.

He was so lonely he got into the habit of talking to the gentle ox, sharing the secrets of his heart with his only friend. In the village everyone laughed at this poor wretch who spent his days chatting to an ox, and he became known across the valley as the cowherd.

In the meantime, far away, hidden above the clouds in the celestial sky, lived the emperor of heaven. He had been blessed with seven daughters and each one was extraordinarily talented and possessed the most marvellous beauty.

The first daughter was gifted with a wondrous voice. She sang the bird's songs, she sang the whistling winds, the roar of the seas and the cries of babies. She had golden hair and wore robes of pure spun gold.

The second daughter had wavy silver hair and wore robes that shimmered with diamonds. She had the gift of food and cooked divine feasts, heavenly snacks, and sublime morsels. Each and every day she baked a thousand moon cakes and boiled ten thousand swallows' nest soups. No man, woman or child, mortal or immortal could behold her dishes without falling upon this food, unable to stop themselves from gorging. So from time to time, the emperor had to lock her in her chambers for a few weeks to give everyone the chance to slim down.

The third daughter had the gift of loveliness. Her hair and robes would change colour to suit the desires of whoever was close by. Her face and her lips, her breasts and her arse would grow and change shape, depending on who was looking upon her. So, for her own comfort she passed most of her time alone in her chambers seated in front of a looking glass dressed in white.

The Fourth daughter had the gift of riches. She had long ruby red hair and her robes were woven together with emeralds and sapphires. She was able to see in her mind's eye all that was of immense value in the heavens and upon earth, no matter how distant. She was a great help to her father when he wanted to know where to send his men to mine for precious gems and metals.

The Fifth daughter had the gift of dancing. Click clack tapping in her diamond-studded shoes she whirled like a dervish, as fast as a spinning top.

Her black hair and rainbow robes would become a kaleidoscope of colours and then she'd levitate up in the air and out through the window into the skies. Whenever she danced, everyone became bewitched by her and found themselves dancing and spinning too. Unfortunately they soon became tired, and found it was impossible to stop their legs from skipping and their arms from waving. Whenever this happened, the emperor who was immune to his daughter's magic, would have the windows and doors bolted. Then he'd order his musicians to play a fast tune and in a flash she'd begin to spin then levitate; but with no way out through the windows she'd whirl upwards as fast as a shooting star, and hit the domed ceiling knocking herself out for a few days. After that everyone could then rest.

The Sixth daughter had the gift of flowers. In the early morning tiny buds would grow from the tips of her hair. Then they would bloom throughout the day into pink peonies and golden lotus blossoms. Her robes were soft as petals and she exuded the heady perfumes of love and joy and gave the emperor no trouble at all.

But he loved the seventh daughter best. She was so beautiful and sweet with shining gold hair and she wore red silk robes. She was gifted with the magic of weaving and the emperor loved to see the beautiful clouds and rainbows she wove to decorate the skies above the world. The seventh daughter was called the weaving maid.

Meanwhile, far away down on earth the cowherd continued to toil each day in the fields for his cruel elder brother. Only his faithful old ox gave him comfort; indeed the cowherd was very grateful to have such a noble friend, little did he know that his ox was really an immortal from heaven.

Once upon a time, the ox had been a brave and mighty warrior and he'd fought many battles on the orders of the jade emperor. As a reward for his daring courage the emperor of heaven had always invited him to the jade palace for celestial celebrations. His great fortune had ended one night in the palace gardens, when by fate he'd chanced upon a beautiful jade maiden. She had been dressed in a robe of lavender silk and upon her head she'd worn a crown of golden fluttering butterflies. When she'd realised the mighty warrior was watching her, she'd tried to run away. But alas her feet were as tiny as lotus buds and she'd only been able to totter and sway.

Seeing her, the mighty warrior's heart had exploded with passion, and unable to stop himself he'd picked her up and swung her over his broad shoulder and carried her to a darker garden. And there under a peach tree he'd made love to her while she'd swooned, both drunken on lust and the sweet perfume of soft ripe peaches.

Unluckily for the mighty warrior the Jade maiden had been the emperor's favourite concubine, and after having committed this grave offence against her master she'd been consumed with guilt. She had tottered and swayed her way back into the palace, and at last finding the emperor she'd dropped down on the ground on all fours and confessed everything.

She had spared no detail of her crime as she revealed to the emperor her secrets. She had made a pitiful sight down on her knees, baring the nape of her snow-white neck. She had knocked her head over and over on the

ground, her forehead becoming covered with dirt through which small drops of blood seeped. Her blood had run together with her tears, down her sweet pale face, trickling over her cherry red lips, while she cried:

‘He licked my snow white breasts with his hot wet tongue.’ Bang Bang Bang.

‘He possessed me over and over, deeply and completely.’ Bang Bang Bang.

‘He tied me to the peach tree by my arms. And the branches shook and trembled while he wrapped my legs around his thighs.’ Bang Bang Bang.

‘He bent me over a low branch with my creamy buttocks exposed to the moon’s rays and...’

‘Hold on!’ the mighty warrior had shouted, ‘She’s got carried away by her own confession. I never touched her butt. She’s making that part up.’

The mighty warrior had tried to defend himself. He’d looked into the concubine’s face, willing her to at least be truthful; but she could no longer see him. Her eyes had rolled back in head, her hair had become as matted as a birds nest and her face as red as a donkey’s arse.

Oblivious to the mighty warriors pleading gaze, she had continued:

‘I’m begging you Sire, kill me. I’m on my knees, imploring you; please take your sword and slice through my unworthy neck.’

In the end the emperor had been moved to great compassion by the sight of her bloody tears and he’d ordered the guards to carry her away to his chamber. However his fury against the warrior was so immense that even his courtiers had trembled as red-hot smoky words billowed from the emperor’s mouth:

‘To be honest, her behaviour has horrified me and after horror has abated the disgust will arrive and I shall send her to work in the kitchens.’

Then he’d pointed his long jade encrusted finger at the mighty warrior:

‘But you! What should I do with you? Kill you like a pig, and roast you on a spit, with a spike stuck down your throat and out through your arsehole? Would you make a delicious feast? I fear not, you would taste foul!’

He’d looked about his court waiting for the immortals and jade maidens to applaud his wit; then he’d taken a step closer towards the mighty warrior and said:

‘You have fought many great battles upon my orders and I have bestowed great honour upon you. Yet truly you’re an unworthy slithering worm! I will banish you to live upon earth as a mortal ox and a beast of burden. You will learn the disgrace of being whipped and the vile shame of being castrated. And when you die I will have you sent to Yen Lo Wang, God of death and ruler of the fifth court of Feng Du, a hell of wailing, gouging and boiling. Or perhaps to Tai Shan Wang, ruler of the seventh court where deceivers and traitors are fed into a mincing grinder.’

And so the mighty warrior had been banished to earth and all that the emperor had decreed became true. He suffered long years of humiliation and endless toil, living day by day with a fear of death and the hell to come.

However, in the twilight of his mortal life he had grown fond of the cowherd. He knew the boy had a pure and brave heart and he felt deeply



sorry for his sad and lonely master. As time passed the cowherd grew into a handsome young man, and he began to long for a wife to love. Then one day the ox had an idea of how to get his revenge on the emperor of heaven and help his deserving master at the same time. The ox spoke to the cowherd for the first time, causing him to fall down on the ground in shock.

He told him:

‘Do not be surprised, for I have the gift of speech and there is something I must tell you. You are a kind and honourable man with a gentle heart, and you deserve a wife who will bring joy to your life. Tonight go to the west river and your wish will come true. Seven fairies will arrive on the shore at dusk to take their evening bath. They will undress and enter the celestial river and if you take the red set of robes, their owner will become your wife.’

The cowherd recovered from his astonishment and set off for the west river at sunset. He waited hidden behind the reeds on the shore, and watched while the emperor’s seven beautiful daughters bathed in the river. Their bodies glowed like pearls as they floated on the surface. The cowherd became spellbound by the weaving maid who was the youngest and the most beautiful. He heard a roaring in his ears when she spread her legs open, letting the river water ebb and flow into her vagina. Then slowly red flowers began to blossom from between her snow-white lips, swelling like glistening tongue tips.

Remembering the ox’s words he crept closer to the shore and stole the red garments and hid them between the reeds. Then the cowherd waited, wondering which fairy the red clothes belonged to. Six of the fairy sisters dressed after their bath and flew away but the youngest tarried behind in the water, and when she stepped on to the shore she found her fairy clothes were gone.

She stood naked on the river shore and the red sun was sinking behind her when the cowherd appeared. He shook with emotion and barely dared to look at her. His voice quivered when he told her he would not return her fairy clothes unless she promised to be his wife. She stood there burning with shame as no man had ever seen her naked body before. She did not know where to look and trembled in front of the cowherd’s passionate gaze. Yet her heart skipped a beat and her body stung with desire; her confusion melted away and she agreed to his request.

That evening the cowherd took the weaving maid back to the farm to meet his elder brother. Imagine his shock, his flabbergasted mouth hanging open like a stunned bullfrog; he saw his elder brother and his ugly wife had become as tiny as two cockroaches. They were running up and down the kitchen table, their voices like squeaks, too afraid to jump down. The weaving maid caught them up in her hand in a twinkling, and she tossed them into the fire where they sizzled then popped releasing a stream of fetid black smoke up the chimney.

So the cowherd and the weaving maid were married and after a year she gave birth to two beautiful children, a boy and a girl. As time passed the old ox grew weaker and he knew his time on earth was ending, so he spoke to the cowherd for the last time.

He told him:

'I am dying and in seven days will be dead. Cure and dry my hide and keep it close by you, for it will save you in times of danger.'

The cowherd was sad to lose his faithful friend but when the time came he did as was requested, and after curing the ox's hide he kept it rolled up in a pouch and always with him.

Meanwhile the emperor of heaven had begun to miss his seventh daughter the weaving maid. The skies were no longer as beautiful without her woven clouds and rainbows, so he asked the queen mother of the western heavens to find her.

The queen mother sent for a palace guard and ordered him to search heaven and earth, she shouted:

'Hunt high and low and poke into every nook and cranny. This is no wild goose chase, she must be found. And if you dare to fail, I will curse your daughter's left foot to grow as large as an ape's foot.'

Many moons passed before the guard discovered the whereabouts of the weaving maid, and when he returned to the palace he cowered at the queen mother's feet knowing his news would infuriate her. He kept his face hidden in his hands; he was so afraid to deliver the news that he spoke through his fingers, his body at the ready to run for the chamber door.

He whispered:

'Your Highness, I have found the seventh daughter. She has married a common cowherd and is living on a farm.'

The queen mother was furious. She beat her own dried up leathery breasts with her stumpy fists. The wattle on her neck flapped with rage. Her eyes turned red and she sprang into the air, her robe of blue clouds fell to the ground and her bare skin like a plucked chicken, sprouted scrawny greasy feathers.

She screamed:

'What! The little slut how dare she?'

And so she sent the gods and soldiers to capture the girl. They flew at full throttle down to the farmhouse and seized the weaving maid by her long golden hair. As fast as a shooting star they carried her away into the sky, flying westwards towards the Kunlun Mountains.

The queen mother stood on a cloud awaiting the return of the weaving maid. Around her were gathered the celestial shamans and emissaries: the three-footed crow, the nine tailed fox, the dancing frog and spirits riding on white stags, all were waiting for the weaving maid's return.

The cowherd seeing his wife disappearing through the clouds chased after her. Carrying his two children with him in bamboo baskets, he wrapped the ox hide around his shoulders, which gave him the gift of flight and the strength of ten thousand oxen. He flew after his wife, faster than her captors could spirit her away, and he saw he would soon reach her.

The queen mother of the western heavens, realising the cowherd was about to catch up, pulled out a golden hairpin and drew a line between the cowherd and the weaving maid; creating the milky way that would separate them for eternity.

The seventh princess was sent to live on the star Vega and the cowherd and their two children were sent to Altair. They wept in despair and the weaving maid begged for clemency.

The emperor of heaven moved by their sadness granted them a meeting once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month. On that day, each year all the magpies fly to the heavens and form a bridge across the Milky Way, from the Lyra to the Aquila constellations, so that they may meet for just one night.

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### **KL Times** May 29th

Kuala Lumpur- The Home Ministry has issued the list of 'Shame'.

A list of Politicians who have amassed millions of Ringgit in Government company shares and privatisations. In particular, millions of shares allocated to the Bumiputra (poor rural ethnic Malays) are actually in the ownership of MJP opposition leader Ahmed Hussein and his family. Shares amounting to several million owned in three companies, Tex Corporation, Malaytech and Ping Communications.

Ahmed Hussein's appropriation of Bumiputra allocated shares took place when he was a key minister and UMNO MP before being expelled from the leading government party.

Since then he has become the main government opposition leader citing his crusade to end UMNO corruption as his main objective.

UMNO Party spokesman told the KL Times "The man's a hypocrite, we intend to investigate the entire business, these shares must return to the rightful recipients, how did Mr Hussein and his family get hold of them?"

Jin Yu continued staring at the newspaper until the print blurred out of focus. He wondered if Hoi Fat was involved in Hussein's fiasco, and he didn't know if he cared one way or the other. It reminded him of the time when they were both still at school, and Hoi Fat had become friends with Chen Cheung, a crooked gambler and moneylender. Everyday Hoi Fat had hung about a seedy café on the banks of the Kinta River, just waiting for his hero to shuffle in and start a game. They'd sit together with the tin miners around a scarred table piled with dirty banknotes, and Chen

Cheung would mock Hoi Fat in front of the miners; treating him like a wretched dog, making the miners cackle and slap the table with their hard hands. And still Hoi Fat had kept going back to play again and again even though Chen Cheung always beat him. He'd known the dice was loaded and he'd lose; Chen Cheung was using him, but still he'd never given up.

Galled by his memories of Hoi fat, Jin Yu tossed the newspaper on his desk and left the office. He stood outside on the steaming street wondering if the café was still there; he felt an overpowering yearning to go back. He walked through the streets and found his way as if he'd been there only yesterday. He loitered at the door, stuck between the past and the present and then he slunk inside and sat down, looking around the dark interior; it seemed the years had never gone by and nothing had changed. He drank Samsu from a cloudy glass and swatted at the flies in the air. A skinny old man seesawed about the café, slowly rubbing the rusting tabletops with a grey dishcloth; his eyes were milky blue, his thin shoulders sharp like axe blades poking through his vest. Jin Yu remembered who it was, Babar Malik. He wanted to call out and say, 'Remember me? Remember us schoolboys? Remember how we gambled?' But he said nothing, not even when Babar turned his head and stared straight at him. He stood up and left a tip on the table, then lurched back out onto the street, drunk on Samsu and the past.

The following morning Jin Yu crept out of bed at dawn, he had an early business meeting. He stood awhile staring at Mandy knotted up in the sheets gently snoring. Then he dressed quietly, took his briefcase and left. After he went back to sleep, stretched out on the rear seat of his car while Osman drove him to Kuala Lumpur.

Later that day Jin Yu stood in his office at Sai Kung Plaza. From the windows he could see the plaza's leisure gardens and pastel painted Condos. This had been one of his best investments. The Condos all sold, the plaza's restaurants and retail outlets all leased, he and his partners were planning another on the North side of Kuala Lumpur. Their meeting over, Jin Yu dreamily began to collect his papers together.

Mrs Drink Water, his brother's secretary, popped her large breasts and small head round the door.

'A Mr Frank Chu is on his way up to see you. Shall I show him through when he gets here?'

'Sorry, tell him he's just missed me.'

Jin Yu grabbed his briefcase and sped towards the door. He knew he was under scrutiny. Mrs Drink Water's suspicious eyes were fixed on him, while her smile exuded commiseration. With a grave look frozen on his face, he slipped past her and left the office.

Once outside, he hurried along the corridor to the fire escape stairwell and made his way down twenty flights of stairs; fearing he would collapse before he reached the end.

Frank Chu, second cousin on his mother's side, was bankrupt and looking for investors to bail him out. He had three ex wives and a dozen children; he was wanted in Singapore for alimony and in Hong Kong for

fraud. Jin Yu reached the ground floor level, relieved to have escaped he wondered if he should go and have a dish of noodles. He reckoned an hour would safely do it. As he stood undecided on the stairwell above the underground parking lot, he heard shouting. It was a voice he knew well.

His nose began to itch as petrol vapours flooded the air from a gush of hot wind from the stairs above the car park. He sneezed a dozen times, tears welled up in his eyes, and taking several deep breaths he clung onto the stair rail as the fumes flooded his lungs. Feeling a sudden sense of euphoria and lightness Jin Yu stumbled down the last flight of stairs. He pushed his way through the dark brown fire door, disorientated by the darkness, he squeezed his eyes shut and breathed deeply through his mouth.

When he re-opened his eyes, a red glow suffused the underground light and a sweet mouldy fragrance with undertones of exhaust gas, burnt logs and ash filled the air.

And then he saw Hoi Fat standing alone by the Pay Phones like a vision. The last person on earth he wanted to see. Hoi Fat was talking on the telephone and as he spun round to see who was there, Jin Yu saw his shirt was unbuttoned. Fat's bare belly glowed white below the flying blue dragon tattooed on his chest, the hair on his head hung about in an uncombed tangle and in the dingy light his face appeared as shiny and round as a silver platter.

Hoi Fat smiled at him with gleaming white teeth and ruby red lips, reminding Jin Yu of the night of vomit and the legend of Hang Tuah. He thought to turn and sneak back through the door, but was rooted to the spot as Hoi Fat shouted into the telephone receiver:

'You! After all the men I've sent you! And we all know the KL Koran thumpers never wash their family jewels and God knows what filthy acts you carried out upon them. And me? Who has a shower twice a day and I'm clean-shaven everywhere and perfumed like a rose. You allow me nothing? All the dirty men I've passed your way. And I? Clean as a whistle and you wont give me any bum action!'

Jin Yu stood immobilised, his briefcase at his side, ears ringing and goose pimples all over his body. He watched as Hoi Fat searched his pockets.

Hoi Fat asked him:

'Have you any change?'

Jin Yu shook his head.

'Blast I've been cut off!' Hoi Fat wailed and tossed the receiver at the wall letting it bump and swing. He grabbed a bottle of Bells Whiskey that was balanced on top of the phone, and emptied what was left down his throat. Then he chucked the empty bottle on the ground and kicked it under a car.

Jin Yu gasped:

'Who were you talking to?'

'No one you know. Maybe, like your favourite hero Song Jiang, I too have finally received a revelation from the goddess Xuannu, and this time

by telephone.' He scratched the blue dragon on his chest, 'She told me that my divine mission in life is to carry out good deeds on earth.' He grinned at Jin Yu, 'In fact, according to Goddess Xuannu, I used to be a god, but I've been sent by the Emperor of Heaven to earth as a punishment for my lingering demonic tendencies.'

Jin Yu snorted:

'Hah, very funny! It sounded more like you're working as a pimp on the side. Is that why you keep photos of those Thai prostitutes in your pocket?'

'I carry them as a testimony to my unstoppable virility and the knowledge that they gave themselves for free.'

'And what about the bum action?'

'Code name for Bumiputra stocks and shares. And stop smirking, I'm still in mourning. While you look like the fat cat who got the cream, my cat Pinky lies dead and buried at the end of my garden.'

Jin Yu grunted:

'Sorry about that, nothing to do with me; I keep telling you.'

Hoi Fat mocked him:

'It has everything to do with you. Men like you who won't fight are like women who sit gossiping all day!'

'So I'm a gossiping old woman now? Anyway there's nothing worth fighting for.' He pointed at Hoi Fat, 'Look at your leader, Ahmed Hussein, he's been caught with his hands in the till!'

'And where else will he find the cash to buy their votes? I must defend my leader's pillaging.' Hoi Fat chuckled, 'We're just like the heroes in *The Water Margin*. Remember Song Jiang and his one hundred and eight bandits? Remember when he led the peasant uprising? We're just a bunch of tough guys getting into dire situations to help the common people. Like Song Jiang, I'm a sort of Robin Hood.'

He beckoned to Jin Yu to follow him and raced off through the rows of parked cars. Panting hard, Jin Yu doggedly pursued Hoi Fat while a strong wind blew through the underground garage, whipping up a cloud of dust that swirled before his eyes and made Hoi Fat disappear. When the wind had passed, a roar thundered from behind a rusting van and out leapt Hoi Fat.

He bellowed:

'Come on you fat bugger, you're dying to know my secrets.'

At last they reached a black Range Rover with tinted windows. Hoi Fat opened the boot, and slowly lifted away the corner of a tartan blanket to reveal a set of battered suitcases. Before he had finished another gust of wind blasted them with fetid air as Jin Yu heard a loud hissing in his ears, and in a trance he watched as a great yellow snake wriggled out from under the blanket. The snake twisted itself into coils, its eyes shooting fiery red sparks. It opened its huge mouth, flickering its tongue, and hissed at Jin Yu.

'I'm a dead man.' Jin Yu whimpered.

'Not to worry,' Hoi Fat patted his shoulder, 'it's just a guard snake.'

Jin Yu watched as Hoi Fat drew a bamboo flute from his pocket, he placed it between his red lips and played a sharp tuneless melody. The snake rose up, wavering in the air before slithering away over the back seat and then it was quickly lost to sight.

Hoi Fat huffed:

'Well I never! What rudeness, playing tricks on us and frightening you so badly. I do apologise.' He gestured towards the suitcases with a flourish, 'Go on then, open them up. They're not locked.'

'No thanks! Your snake nearly scared me to death.'

'Not to worry I'll teach him a lesson.'

Hoi Fat dived head first into the back of the car, his legs flailing in the air. He struggled between the seats, then rolled back out of the boot and landed on the ground with the snake. He scrambled onto his knees gripping the snake's neck in his fist, and began to swing it over his head in circles, faster and faster. Finally he let go as Jin Yu watched the yellow snake fly away over the car roofs and disappear.

Hoi Fat turned back to Jin Yu, he panted heavily:

'Go on you can look inside now.'

'No thanks.'

Hoi Fat snapped open the cases revealing they were stuffed full of used bank notes.

He boasted:

'Even the foreign journalists know we hand out packets before parliamentary votes. How else can we change the law? But they write nothing because the end justifies the means. So are you with us?'

'With you! Are you mad?'

Hoi Fat ignored him and carried on:

'Coffers of money, votes for the greater good. I can offer you two targets. One is pockmarked and always bitching; give him a few packets and make yourself scarce. He's keen on blackmail and he'll stop at nothing. The other is pale, short and fat.' He jutted his chin at Jin Yu, 'Which one works for you?'

'Neither.' Jin Yu announced, 'I don't care about politics. I've no time. I'm getting married soon, I'm in love.'

Hoi Fat stared; a smug grin curled his fat red lips:

'What, with a woman or a business? Is it Mary Wong, heiress to Sempat Oil? Or maybe a nice educated girl complete with PhD, ready to retire on your arm and begin breeding dugongs, or should I say sea cows?'

'Listen to you!' Jin Yu retorted, 'You consider yourself some crazy outlaw, some sort of character from The Water Margin, running a band of thugs! What do you know of love and marriage?'

Hoi Fat glared at him and whined:

'Like Song Jiang, I also had a concubine named Yan Poxi. At first I had no desire for her, her mother managed to push her on me. But after, I fell in love with her and then she found another lover.' He wiped invisible tears from his eyes, 'I was heartbroken. Then one day Poxi discovered a private letter from my leader and a suitcase full of cash, and she threatened to spill

the beans to the police unless I gave her the money.' His voice had become hollow, 'I couldn't allow her to walk away with the bucks. But she kept nagging me, yelling and yanking at my clothes causing my penknife to accidentally drop from my pocket.' He stooped and picked up the invisible knife, 'And then she started screaming, accusing me of trying to kill her. And In a fit of rage, I, Song Jiang alias Hoi Fat, killed her with the knife. Remember my friend Chinese women are treacherous.

'Liar!' Jin Yu reprimanded him. 'You've nicked that story from The Water Margin. Anyway my fiancée is not Chinese she's English.

'Marrying English?' Hoi Fat scoffed at him, 'Ahh... Don't! UK women are worse! I'll tell you a true story this time.'

He glowered at Jin Yu, his face serious, 'Now, you don't know this, but while I was in London I married an English bitch. I loved her. She had white skin and gold hair, little round blue piggy eyes and a tiny turned up nose just like a baby pig's snout. She was pure English and had a ginger minge.'

He shook his head, his face hardening, 'When I switched my degree from medicine to political science, my father cut the purse strings. In the end I had twenty pounds in my pocket, a worn out Vauxhall Viva and a wife who wanted a divorce.'

He swallowed, 'She didn't even say she was leaving, just wrote Goodbye Jerk, in the dust on the car hood.'

Jin Yu shivered as currents of chilly air whipped around him.

Hoi Fat expelled a deep breath of whiskey and delusion:

'I have no more time for women. Within the party I am known as Simple Purity... Ever since childhood I have loved playing with weapons. I can summon the rain, ride the mists and drive the clouds...'

Rolling fog swirled before Jin Yu, as Hoi Fat beamed from behind a glistening net of vapour droplets that hung in the air like dew on a spider's web. He seemed to have grown short and swarthy, his eyes like those of a phoenix and his mouth big and squarish.

'I have in mind a partner, and it could be you.' His eyes gleamed, 'Are you a man who'd dare to go through fire and ice? Would you stand beside me to live or die?

Jin Yu retorted glumly:

'No. You live your life in a drunken delusion, where as my hallucinations are caused by hunger and poisonous petrol fumes.'

Jin Yu picked up his briefcase, straightened his clothes and turned his back on Hoi Fat. No longer sure if he were awake or dreaming he made his way towards the fire door; leaving behind Hoi Fat's subterranean world in search of fresh air and noodles. He could hear the notes of a flute coming softly from behind the parked cars. Gradually the melody drew nearer and a red brown ox plodded out of the darkness. A boy was riding the ox, smiling as he played a silver flute.

Hoi Fat shouted at his back:

'Then I shall depart without you. I shall mount this beast, and together with this simple cowherd, I will ride the clouds that lead us ever onwards.



There's no point in your climbing any higher. The world is full of venomous snakes and wild beasts. They're liable to kill you.

\*

Jin Yu and Mandy sat together on the old opium bed. There was a lacquered camphor chest open in front of them. While Jin Yu rummaged inside, Mandy slowly traced her fingertips over the sides decorated with carvings: a stream in the high mountains, dragons in the heavens, a river flowing through the land where a man fished from his sampan sailing by a bridge, and three women stood leaning over the water to pluck blossoms from a weeping cherry tree that grew on the shallow banks, while red-crowned cranes flew across the heavens with immortals riding on their backs. She sighed and wished she could sail in a sampan, floating past weeping cherry trees that blew in the wind and rained petals upon her.

The Sampan dweller's living quarters consist of a cockpit amidships which is covered with a small hut made of woven matting. In the aft compartment is the galley with a cooking-stove. If alone the oarsman will sit there so that he may cook a meal while he yulohs, and if his family live on board they also use this small space. In the fore compartment are provisions, clothing, bedding, food and fuel.

Ningpo men never take their wives and families afloat, instead the wives and even the children of the Soochow sampan-dwellers can take their turn at the yuloh. Soochow women have a fame for beauty and their men for a graceful gait. They scornfully claim that one reason why the women of Ningpo do not live afloat is that they suffer from seasickness.

Life on the Yangtze- George Huang.

Jin Yu and Mandy were sifting through piles of old photographs and letters. She wanted to see pictures of Jin Yu when he was a little boy. She picked up a black and white photo of him, he looked about two or three years old. It was a studio portrait photograph, and on the wall behind him were five flying geese. He was sitting alone, his chubby hands curled in his lap. There was another photograph of him being held between two women, one was Chinese the other Indian. All three had their eyes scrunched up against the sun. Jin Yu had his arms around the Chinese women.

'Is that you mother?'

'Yes.'

Mandy studied the woman's face; she was smiling and holding her beautiful chubby second son, his plump soft arms around her neck like a talisman to protect her.

'When did she die?'

'When I was nineteen and my father died four years ago.'

'So you're all alone.'

'I have my brother and my uncles and aunties, my cousins and now I have you. You'll be my wife.'

Mandy flicked through some more photographs of Jin Yu as a chubby toddler and then a chubby schoolboy. She doubted whether he'd ever

played sports at school; he'd probably passed all his time reading and spending his generous pocket money on moon cakes and iced lollies. She could imagine him popular because he was rich, in black plimsolls, white socks below his fat knees and an elastic snake belt. The other kids ready to accompany him to the Kopitiam shop, full of sweet fishy spicy novelties. He would have filled up on perasa durian, muruku and sugary fried florescent cakes, with Kickapoo Joy Juice to wash down all those snacks. He would have offered the others something too.

When she and Jin Yu were alone together she never wondered what the hell she was doing. He fitted her like a pair of old fluffy slippers, his constant presence wrapping around her like a warm snug blanket. He'd do anything she wanted or so it seemed. Sometimes she'd hug him tightly, feeling a fierce love for him, and whenever he watched her with a slow gaze, his desire pulled her in.

Yet there were times when she saw him in a crowd and it felt wrong; it felt like they didn't really belong together. Sometimes he'd stand waiting for her by the car and when she saw him across the street, she couldn't see him as her lover or even a man that she might care for. He would appear under the glaring sunlight, as too old and too fat, like a stranger, someone who didn't belong to her even when he smiled. And whenever he became just some rich Chinese man, a businessman in a dark suit and shiny shoes, she would panic; she couldn't bear to see him this way.

She put Jin Yu on a diet and told him to stop eating meat, just some fish for the brain. As he was out during the day, she started making him a packed lunch. She bought a pale blue Tupperware box and each morning before Jin Yu left she would fill it with cheese crackers, marmite sandwiches, and raw vegetable sticks. Jin Yu would take it and hurry to his car. He wasn't offended by the lunchbox. He thought it flattering that she'd forgotten the dogs and Padma, and had taken him on instead. He'd kiss her in the kitchen, while she stood looking at him with narrowed eyes and then he'd leave.

The first day he opened his lunch box hoping to find some fried savouries and was disappointed.

'What's that?' Amir asked him.

'Oh my fiancée, she's a vegetarian.'

'Putting you on rabbit food, eh?'

Jin Yu held out the lunch box to Amir, 'Don't want to hurt her feelings, can you chuck it?'

'Also my wife has stopped my fried breakfast. I'll have the crackers if you don't want them.'

Amir picked out the edible starchy bits and threw the rest. As usual they had a lunch of steamed dumplings, fried rice, savoury shrimp and roast duck. They never ordered pork because he and Amir were in the habit of sharing and poking their chopsticks in each other's dishes.

After several days he told Mandy not to bother. He confessed he hadn't eaten his packed lunch.

'So what did you do with the food? Did you chuck it?'

'Well Amir ate the crackers and I threw the salad stuff in the bin.'

'At your office?'

'Yes.'

She was angry and threw the lunch box at him. He started laughing.

'Oh come on Mandy!'

'Why did Amir eat the crackers?'

'Because his wife wont let him have breakfast.'

'Oh!' Still she hit him again.

'Mandy stop it!'

She was wild and he grabbed her arms and forced her backwards. He held her tightly to him so she couldn't punch him. He could feel her heart thumping.

'Why are you so angry?'

'I don't know.'

That night he told her he was sorry. She rolled over on the bed like a cat and put her arms around his podgy waist.

'It doesn't matter, you can stay fat, getting up every day for the lunch box has worn me out.'

\*

Jin Yu sat opposite his brother in their father's old office. The dark framed photographs were still on the wall, and his father was there now along with all his ancestors. Together they stared gravely down upon him and he felt he was in a court being judged. Underneath the row of ancestors was a small shelf full of smouldering incense, cash and food. Jin Yu was embarrassed by this homespun altar, it felt obscene, as though they were heathens. He knew Han Yu never actually kept the shrine burning but he made sure it was done.

Ancestor worship is a ritual practice, based on the belief that deceased family members have a continued existence and possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. Early forms of ancestor worship were deeply rooted and extensively developed by the late neolithic period in China.

Rituals of ancestor worship consist of offerings to the deceased to provide for their welfare in the afterlife. Ancestor worship begins at the deceased kin's funeral, at which necessities like a toothbrush, comb, towel, shoes and water are placed in the coffin or burned as a sacrifice. After the funeral, Chinese families set up an altar in the home or place of work for the purpose of ancestor worship, daily offerings are made to ensure the family member gets a good start in the afterlife. Favourite foods, wine, and small sums of money are placed on the altar in bowls or burned in front of the altar.

Statues representing servants or other necessities for the afterlife are also placed on or near the altar. The altar normally includes a portrait or photograph of the ancestor, an ancestral tablet inscribed with the names and dates of the deceased and cups for offerings. After a 49-day period when the deceased is believed to be undergoing judgement, the deceased is then worshipped along with all the other ancestors of the family.

The goal of ancestor worship is to ensure the ancestors' continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living and sometimes to ask for special favours or

assistance. The social function of ancestor worship is to cultivate kinship values like family loyalty and continuity of the family lineage.  
A Guide To Chinese Mysticism- Herbert J Ferwend. 1949

He wanted to tell Han Yu he was going to get married, but he was worried what his brother would say.

When he'd first bought Mandy home, he'd asked Han Yu and his wife to meet her. They had gathered together in the reception room, shaking hands politely while Padma placed a tray of cocktails on the table. But when Sue Chin offered Mandy something to drink, she'd refused and had turned to look out the window. He'd asked them how their new baby was getting along, and they'd led him and Mandy into the baby's room.

Mandy had peered into the cot, 'He's so sweet!' she'd whispered.

He'd looked for a motherly expression, but her hair had covered her face as she'd lent over the baby and touched his fat little hand.

'How old is he?'

'One year.'

'And what's his name?'

'Phang Soon Bao.'

A few more minutes had passed while they'd remarked how the baby had grown and what strong legs. 'He'll be a footballer!' Jin Yu had said.

By then Mandy was already at the door. He'd excused himself and followed her but Han Yu had called him back. Sue Chin had gone to check on the baby and they were alone.

Han Yu had asked him, 'Who is this girl you've bought to our house?'

Jin Yu had looked away and said, 'I told you, she's a friend.'

'Are you sure? Just friends or maybe she's your girlfriend?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Where did you meet her?'

'In Kuala Lumpur.'

'How old is she?'

'Nineteen.'

'She's too young for you.'

Jin Yu had looked down, what could he say?

Han Yu went on, 'How long will she be here?'

'I don't know.' He hoped forever.

Han Yu had sighed, 'Be careful Jin Yu, take care.'

After that Han Yu had ignored her presence and Jin Yu had hidden his growing ardour.

Now sitting in his brother's office he was ready. He looked at Han Yu, already on his second wife, and told him and all the ancestors on the wall what he'd come to say.

'Mandy and I are getting married.'

Han Yu jolted forward in his chair, 'What? How so? She is too young and she's wild. One day you will come home and find her gone.'

'I will tame her!'

'No.' Han Yu shook his head, 'You can't tame wild creatures. Some

times when they are injured or sick you may take care of them for a while, but as soon as they become strong again they will leave.' He spat, 'She's like a crazy horse, only years and life can break her.'

Jin Yu couldn't wait. He wanted to put a fine golden chain around her and keep her close by. He was enticing her into his world with offerings and after he'd not be able to stop himself from shutting the door. He knew she lived in the present, and what she loved now she might forget later. She moved like fire, cremating everything in her path. She could marry him today and leave him tomorrow. He had to take the risk. Once she'd told him, if something were truly hers, she couldn't lose it even if she threw it away.

Jin Yu confessed, 'I need her.'

'You can't marry her.' Han Yu announced. 'Here in Malaysia, the legal age is twenty-one. You would need her parent's consent. Do they know about you?'

'No.'

Later that day Jin Yu checked the requirements for a civil marriage ceremony with a foreign national in Malaysia. Amir had collected the information for him, smiling in complicity as he delivered the papers to Jin Yu's office. Jin Yu wondered why Amir seemed the only one happy at what was to come.

That night he read the list to Mandy.

'Legal age for marriage in Malaysia is twenty-one, otherwise consent of parents or guardians must be given. Under Sharia law the minimum age for Muslims to get married is eighteen for males and sixteen for females. Note B, Muslim girls who have reached puberty may marry with the permission of Malaysian Sharia courts.'

She laughed, 'You'll just have to wait till I'm older.'

'What about your parents?'

'Don't drag them in, they'll never agree.'

He didn't insist, he knew parents could wreck dreams.

'I can't wait!' he told her.

'Why not? You have me anyway.'

'I want you to be my wife.'

'Then we'll become Muslims!'

'Don't say that.'

\*

They were speeding again through the jungles and the road was dark and wet. He stroked her yellow hair while she slept with her head in his lap. He ran his fingers along the line of her cheek across her soft mouth, he slipped his hand inside her shirt feeling her beating heart and small breast in the palm of his hand. He rested his head and closed his eyes. They were going to stay on Penang Island for the weekend and after a flight to Singapore where he would buy her an engagement ring.

Later that night Jin Yu sat alone on the veranda of the old Penang

beach house; the night was dark, the moon was low and he could see the shiny black sea through the trees.

As a child he'd spent his school holidays in this house with his brother and cousins, but since then many years had gone by.

When their father had died, Han Yu and Jin Yu inherited everything between them including the two houses built by their great grandfather. Han Yu decided to sell them and divide the proceeds. First the old mansion in the heart of Ipoh.

He'd told Jin Yu:

'Too big, valuable plot, good for development.'

'What will happen to the bamboo forest and the Jade salon?'

'Forest is a waste of space. Think car parks. And Jade salons belong in the past.'

Han Yu then wanted to sell the old Penang beach house, which had acres of garden.

'New hotel development, investors keen and ready.'

Jin Yu could not agree, 'Forget my share in the Ipoh mansion, I'll keep the beach house.'

Han Yu had let him have his way, 'Maybe not so foolish, you're sitting on gold.'

Mandy had fallen in love with the old house right away. She had run through the rooms, opening doors and shuttered windows, bouncing on the four-poster beds and stroking the old dark Malacca furniture.

That evening Jin Yu had promised her they'd live in the house when they returned from Singapore. He avoided telling her he had too much work in Ipoh, and it could only be for the weekends. Now she was in bed asleep, he smiled to himself; she was so sweet when she was pleased.

The phone began to ring, it was the middle of the night and very few people had the number.

He answered cautiously, his voice sounding hoarse:

'Hello?'

'Ahh good! Thought you might be sleeping.' Hoi Fat's voice crackled on the line, 'Are you alone?'

Jin Yu sputtered:

'You! How did you know I was here? And how did you get my number?'

'I know because I follow you, and I have friends at Telecom Malaysia. I need your help.'

'Leave me alone and don't ever call me at home again.' His voice cracked, 'I want nothing to do with you.'

'Now don't get on your high horse. I was just joking, I don't really follow you. I'm not a stalker. Actually I saw your driver Osman in George Town and knew you had to be on the island. It was like divine providence, I'm in a jam and need a favour.'

'Ask your leader or ask your mother but don't even dare to ask me.'

'She's eighty.'

'Who?'

'My mother.' Hoi Fat retorted. 'Listen, you're the only one I can trust. I know you'll keep your trap shut. My leader is in the jam with me.'

'I want nothing to do with you and your suitcases. I'm going to put the phone down now.'

'No wait! Please it's not luggage, I promise. It's something worse and has nothing to do with politics. It's a private jam, very personal.'

Jin Yu sighed:

'Just go away, you're like a bad dream.'

'You know I cant. Will you help me?'

'What is it?'

'Meet me in George Town, at seven Gelang Argyll, in half an hour.'

'It's the middle of the night!'

'Exactly, it has to be done before dawn.'

Then Hoi fat hung up before he could say no.

Jin Yu had given Osman the night off to visit his family, and he'd have to drive the car himself. He thought of asking the security guard to go with him but couldn't leave the house unprotected. So he found himself driving alone along Batu Feringhi and into the city, he knew the streets like the back of his hand. He took some short cuts and put his foot down on the gas speeding along the deserted roads. Arriving in Gelang Argyll, he slowed to a stop along side the pavement; but before he could get out of the car, Hoi Fat climbed into the passenger seat clutching a bottle of whiskey. He offered it to Jin Yu, who shook his head, and then Fat took several long deep slugs while Jin Yu watched him in disgust.

Fat burped and asked:

'Do you remember when we were at school together? We were once good friends.'

'That was a long time ago.'

'And we're not friends now?'

'No.'

'And we'll never be friends again?'

'No, you cant put the clock back.'

Hoi Fat screwed the top back on the bottle and tossed it on the car floor; he turned in his seat to face Jin Yu and spoke softly, cajoling him:

'Do you remember when we used to go hunting for war tunnels under the school?'

'So what? We never found them.'

'Maybe not.' Hoi Fat admitted, 'But I remember when we'd sneak out of school to go and play Mah-jong in that cafe on the river bank. And remember Chen Cheung always beat everyone?' He laughed at Jin Yu, 'He called you Po Sin 'Grandfather Elephant' because you were so serious and so fat.'

Jin Yu quipped:

'And he called you Wang 'Hope' because he knew you were in love with the prostitute who sat in the corner waiting for tin miners.'

'OK OK. But remember the day you said you were going to defeat Chen Cheung? You bought a bag of cash stolen from your father's desk,

and you shared it with me and we played him for big bucks.' Fat turned away and stared out the window onto the empty street, his voice quavered, 'You won and everyone said you'd be lucky with money, and they called you Shing 'Victory'. Well remember this! I lost because I'm unlucky with money.'

'Liar! You lost because you wanted to. I only remember you betrayed me.'

'You still won though!' Hoi Fat pleaded, 'Didn't you? I never caused any harm.'

Jin Yu accused him:

'You discarded the Red dragons and the Winds on purpose. You knew they could help Chen Cheung win. You let him steal from you.'

*"He sits on the hard metal chair. Rivers of sweat cooling his back. A rusty fan blows smoky wind as flies spin round and dance on the tiles. He rolls the dice and passes them on. Chen Cheung wins the east wind. Stir the tiles loudly like the twittering of sparrows, and then build the great wall with no gaps allowed or bad spirits will enter the game.*

*Chen Cheung breaks the wall and the last game begins. Jin Yu is in the west wind. His heart thuds, life is marvellous on the edge of a razor. He has bamboo and wan and one green dragon. Reveal and conceal. Declare a rooster take another tile. One white dragon and turn the cat. Hoi Fat discards a red dragon and Chen Cheung swoops it up and reveals a Kong.*

*Liar Liar, your pants are on fire. White dragons hang from flypapers. He tries to catch Hoi Fat's eye and Hoi Fat is sweating and won't look at him, and Chen Cheung smiles slyly. He plays on with the beggar man and the thief. His heart sinks, they're neck and neck and this is the last game. If he loses this he's lost it all. Hoi Fat has cost him the Thirteen Orphans.*

*Chen Cheung's long yellow nails tap on the tiles. He can hear the clock ticking behind him and the birds singing in the street. He looks out through the doorway, there is a cherry tree across the road, and he can't see the birds for the blossom. They play on, piles of money on the table now. When you're so brave take a swig and pass the bottle, and a dog humps a bitch in the street and all the tin miners have gathered round. He needs a nine of bamboo then he'll have the heavenly gates. The spiders crawl out the cracks in the wall telling him no, and still he gets it.*

*Mah-jong!"*

Hoi Fat argued:

'You still won. Remember? The noblest game of skill, strategy, calculation and chance.'

Jin Yu scoffed at him:

'If I did win it's no thanks to you! I'm going home I've heard enough.'



'Wait.' Hoi Fat wheedled, 'I need you to help me get a mattress out of an apartment.'

'What? I'm not a removal man. Pay someone to do the job.'

'I can't, this has to be kept secret. It's a long story my friend, full of twists and turns.'

Hoi Fat sniggered; he took the bottle from the floor and emptied the last of the whiskey down his throat.

Jin Yu told him:

'You're pissed, just shut up and get out my car. I don't know why I bothered coming here, I must have been mad.'

Hoi Fat smiled sadly:

'You came because old habits die hard, and you know there's no one else I can ask for help. Don't deny you're still my friend, the only one I have. That's the truth. Admit it, that's why you came.'

Jin Yu wondered if it were true.

'Maybe I just came tonight out of curiosity.'

'Then my fat friend, follow me and satisfy your nosy nature.'

Jin Yu reasoned there was no point in going home. He was here now so he might as well see it through. He locked the car and followed Hoi Fat into the building. Inside the lift he avoided looking at him. They got out on the top floor and Hoi Fat stood outside the apartment, his ear pressed to the door. He took a bunch of keys from his pocket and let himself in.

He grabbed Jin Yu's sleeve and pulled him through the doorway. He announced:

'Welcome to the romance of the three kingdoms. Please take care not to tread on the serpent, don't look it in the eye, it's an evil omen.'

Jin Yu stepped over a long white snake lying slaughtered in the hallway. There was a radio playing some old rock song and the wind blew the dust through the hall. They went through to the lounge where a thin white boy stood, dressed in leather and chains. He wore make up on his face, lipstick on his mouth and his toenails were painted dark red.

Hoi fat made a bow and said:

'Jin Yu meet the rent boy.'

The rent boy asked:

'When's Mr Hussein coming? I went to the supermarket and picked up the KY jelly.'

'He's not.' Hoi Fat told him, 'We've come for the mattress.'

'No! I need it.'

'We're taking it any way.'

The boy looked to Jin Yu:

'Where am I gonna sleep?'

Jin Yu didn't know.

'On the sofa?' Hoi Fat suggested.

'It's not fair.' The boy whined, 'They call me bum boy and Mr Hussein promised me I'd be a film star in his porno movies. But the video camera is not professional, and I know the difference.' He pointed at them, 'All you lot! You think you're better than me! Mr Hussein says fetch my rent boy,

but I'm not at his beck and call. And his driver says, Shut up bum boy and earn your money.' He pouted, his eyes crazy like windmills, 'It's not fair, and I want to go home!'

Hoi Fat hushed him:

'You'll be on a flight tomorrow. No worries, first flight in the morning!'

The boy shrugged, popped his gum, arched his back and lay down on the sofa. His bare feet hung over the armrest like two old dead fish and he smiled to himself, for what he didn't know, and left them to get the mattress.

Hoi Fat whispered in Jin Yu's ear:

'My leader Hussein, alias Emperor Ling, has given too much confidence to the palace eunuchs, and now we see only bad omens everywhere. I believe our country is doomed to misrule and division, just like in the three kingdoms.'

They entered the bedroom, as a gust of wind swirled through the air forming a cloud of dust. Jin Yu jumped backwards as a big black snake dropped down from the roof beams and coiled itself upon the bed. Hoi Fat leaned over and raised his fist, shaping his fingers into a golden lotus, from which puffs of billowing damp fog emerged. Snowy white mist filled the room, blinding Jin Yu till the wind blew the haze away; and then he saw the snake had gone and wondered if it had all been a trick of the light.

They struggled with the mattress, and from the room next door, the boy moaned he'd have to sleep on the sofa; he said he was a porno actor not a rent boy. The mattress was stained and stank of sweat, they rolled it up and Hoi Fat used his belt to tie it in the middle. They dragged it through to the sitting room while the rent boy giggled at them.

Hoi Fat glowered:

'Don't mind him, he's a juvenile delinquent, never learned how to behave.'

A hot wind was blowing and the aircon was busted, and Jin Yu stood sweating, doubled over the mattress.

Hoi Fat spoke wearily:

'Remember in the story, when hens developed male characteristics and became cocks? We are now witnessing young men turning into women. A miracle always caused by effeminate eunuchs meddling in affairs of the state.'

The full moon shot beams through the window, moon shadows splintered and flickered, twisting into a long wreath of black smoke. Jin Yu shrank backwards as Hoi Fat spat on the ground; and with a wave of his hand, the smoky wreath sprouted leaves, twisting and coiling like a giant beanstalk stretching upwards, out through the window and arching dozens of feet into the sky. Hoi Fat's complexion had become as clear as jade, and his lips were rich red. Jin Yu watched as Hoi Fat's ears swelled, the lobes touching his shoulders, and his hands hung down below his knees.

He said to Jin Yu:

'See me? I look just like Liu Bei; also I climbed trees as a child and told the village children I was the Son of Heaven. Don't you understand? It's the three kingdoms all over again.'

The smoky beanstalk turned to a sooty dust that fluttered in the air. He patted Jin Yu's shoulder and said in a jolly voice:

'Sorry I need to pee, back in a tick.'

Jin Yu sat down in a sagging armchair. The rent boy was still lying on the sofa. He rolled over on his side and said to Jin Yu:

'Do you want the KY jelly? I wont need it if I'm leaving in the morning.'

Hoi Fat was in the toilet. Jin Yu shook his head and struggled out of the chair. He strode over to the open window and stood waiting, watching the cockroaches crawl down the curtains.

Eventually Hoi Fat returned; a peculiar floral fragrance emanated from him that stung Jin Yu's nostrils. They dragged the mattress towards the entrance; the slaughtered serpent was still there, pouring blood across the floor. Blood streaked with coloured rays, forming a rainbow that streamed through the hallway.

Hoi Fat chuckled:

'Remember the evil omen of the Jade chamber? Same rainbow, same snake.'

The mattress wouldn't fit into the cramped lift and they had to use the stairs. As they struggled down four flights heaving and pulling, Jin Yu remarked slyly:

'I remember in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Emperor Ling was greatly moved by these bad omens. But the Eunuchs grew bolder and ten of them formed a political party, called the Regular Attendants. One of them, Chang Jang also known as Hoi Fat, became the emperors most trusted advisor or perhaps his pimp? And Emperor Ling aka Hussein, loved him so and called him Daddy.'

They put the mattress in Hoi Fat's jeep and drove up Penang hill on a black snaky road full of potholes. Hoi Fat stopped the jeep on the side of the Ayer Itam dam.

'Should we set fire to it first or just chuck it in?'

'Safer just to throw it.'

They hauled it from the back, rolled it to the edge and watched it bounce down the concrete slope and into the water.

Jin Yu asked him:

'Why?'

'There's no harm.' Hoi fat bantered, 'If we lived in a free society who would mind?'

'Still, you've gone too far bringing a gay boy prostitute from London.'

'No.' Hoi Fat told him, 'I found him in Brighton. My leader wanted a Jewish boy with those long black hair ringlets but I couldn't find one.'

They looked on as the mattress sank.

'Who were you shouting at that day in the Plaza car park?'

'My leader, I can't help it, maybe I love him.'

'Take me back to my car.' Jin Yu turned away from Hoi Fat. 'I don't want to know anymore.'

'You have to know!' Fat wheedled, 'What if I want to tell you? Remember how it was? You always had everything! You were my friend and I wanted to fit in. But I had nothing till my father died.' He cackled like he didn't care, 'He was filthy rich and a bloody miser. How do you think I paid for the cinema? The flash wristwatch? The girl in the noodle shop? The leather jacket? Yeah I was a rent boy, a pondan, call it what you like.'

'Were you Chen Cheung's boy?' He'd always known.

'I borrowed money from him. Remember? Best mah-jong player and biggest moneylender! I paid it back to him, in a dirty old room in the back of his shop that stank of piss.'

'Shut up! I want to go.'

'I couldn't bear to go back in that room again and again. I owed him and I had to lose. That money you gave me to play was enough to buy my freedom. I didn't care if you lost too. You could have blamed one of your servants for nicking the cash. Who would have suspected you?'

Jin Yu excused himself:

'You never told me, I would have helped.'

'Tell you what? My father's mean, I go to the best schools and have less money than a sweepers son. What about my face? I couldn't lose face. Never criticise your parents. My mother was a drunk. Respect your elders. By the way I'm a bastard, my mother had a lover before I was born. I never knew who my real father was. It was a family secret. One day in London I realised I had no face of my own.'

'Why are you telling me now?'

'I don't know why.'

Inside the jeep, driving through the forest back to George Town, Jin Yu kept silent. When they reached his car he told Hoi Fat:

'Never ever call me again and if you see me pretend you haven't.'

*"The moon hangs low and thin black trees scratch at the sky, there's an old empty room in the back of the shop. Don't go in that room because he's high on opium and drunk on whiskey. There's a mattress in the corner stained with shit and blood. Your mother's a lush and your daddy's not your Pa."*

\*

Jin Yu sat with Mandy in a shophouse in the Chinese quarter. First he'd taken her to the top jewellery shops on Orchard road, but she'd turned her nose up. He should have known; she'd stopped him wearing a gold Rolex his father had given him after he'd graduated, she'd told him:

'Makes you look like a rich boxwallah!'

Now he sat watching the old Chinese jeweller; he had long curved fingernails, and his face distended into a grin like yellowed parchment stretching over his skull. On the wooden table between them he pushed

and prodded a pile of diamonds, lifting them to the light with a pair of long tweezers. Jin Yu had persuaded Mandy to have a ring made for her instead.

'I don't want a diamond,' she said.

'These are beautiful they're south African.'

'I don't care where they come from I don't like diamonds.'

He had bought Alison a diamond engagement ring; perhaps it was bad luck.

'Another stone then? Sapphires? Rubies?'

'No, I want an old ring, an antique one.'

'New is better,' he said.

She turned to the Jeweller and asked, 'Qing gu jièzhi?'

The old Jeweller chuckled and Jin Yu remembered the first day he'd heard her arguing in the market calling the Chinese man a pig in Malay, and all the times she'd tried to chat in Hakka with beggars and kids at hawker stalls or with hotel staff in Mandarin; making mistakes, making them laugh.

The old man shuffled off on his rubber flip flops and returned with a cracked leather bag, inside it was full of old velvet and leather ring boxes.

In the end she chose a rose gold ring with an intricate filigree flower set with seed pearls and rose sapphires. Jin Yu was disappointed. He wanted her ring to be a statement, a sign to everyone, a classic engagement ring. After he'd paid for the ring, they set off to buy a dress. He suggested Dior or Channel but they never made it. She fell in love with a dress in a Chinese shop in the same mildewed road as the jewellers. It was a tight-fitting cheongsam embroidered with dragons, their fiery flames curling around her breasts. The slits in the skirt were so high he could see the ribbon ties from her slip. He was ashamed, in Singapore the prostitutes and nightclub hostesses wore the same dresses and would kneel down to serve drinks at the tables.

Later, back at the hotel Jin Yu sat on the edge of the bed watching her as she twirled in front of the looking glass, lifting her arms high like wings. She was wearing his ring and she looked beautiful.

'Mandy, don't wear that dress tonight, I want to take you to the Mandarin,' he told her.

'So?'

'The restaurant waitresses wear these Chinese dresses.'

She knew she embarrassed him.

'Then lets go somewhere else! I don't want to go to a fucking revolving restaurant on a hotel rooftop anyway.'

He marvelled how she could be so rude, so fast. He didn't care tonight.

'Where would you like to go?'

That evening they went to Bugis Street. Hand in hand they walked past the wooden stalls with rusting tin roofs, the stench of rotting rubbish and open drains wafted in the air. The food stall cafes were filled with tourists and locals, junkies in dirty sarongs and painted lady boys, while old Chinese men sat smoking in greying vests under the neon lights.

They sat on rusty old chairs around a small table, eating noodles and drinking Maotai from greasy glasses. Jin Yu in his suit and Mandy in her turquoise shiny silk dress with her blazing yellow hair, she looked like a whore and he was the client. She didn't care and he didn't see. The food was delicious and Jin Yu was glad until Mandy stood up. She began waving across the street to a thin boy with a big head of curls.

Then Jin Yu found himself squashed round the table between her mate Norbert, and a hefty Danish girl with massive hands.

'Friends of mine, haven't seen them since Bombay,' she told him.

Mandy sat on Jin Yu's lap, she poured herself another glass of Maotai and giggled as her tits brushed up against his cheek and he felt abashed. As he turned away he saw an old toothless Chinese woman carrying a battered cardboard box full of cheap tat. She was making her way towards them, weaving between the crammed tables, nodding and dipping like a puppet. She stopped before them, dressed in pyjamas and black kung fu shoes, her toothless smile was shy as she let her gaze drop away, but her shrewd eyes glittered hard. Then she thrust her box at them, lifting it up and shaking the contents. Mandy rummaged through the plastic jade bangles and fake gold watches and bought a packet of cigarettes and the hefty Dane pulled out a vibrator and switched it on, they laughed like jackals.

The old toothless box woman joined in, and she tried to massage Jin Yu's neck with a vibrating pink rubber penis. Everyone was grinning at him through the smoke.

'Shit! Are they second hand?' asked the hefty Dane.

The toothless woman pulled a matchbox out of her pyjamas, her black ragged nails sliding it open, displaying the tinfoil packets of opium squashed inside. She smiled like a tiny child, her gums glistening in the neon.

Mandy kept rummaging. 'Do you have any false teeth or just false cocks?' She had become showy and vulgar. Jin Yu couldn't stand seeing her behave like this.

'Mandy I'm so tired why don't we go back to our hotel?'

'You go I'll come later.'

He had to leave now or lose face. He walked away to take a cab and from the corner he turned back to wave, but she didn't turn round. He stood there watching her shining in the dark alley.

Back at the hotel he tried to sleep. He felt betrayed and worried what she might get up to, and his only relief was tomorrow they'd be returning to Ipoh. He must have fallen asleep because when he next opened his eyes there was a grey dawn light seeping into the room. She hadn't returned. His heart thudded in his chest and he could barely breathe. As the hours passed he couldn't decide what to do. He'd have to call the police. When he could not bear to wait any longer she came back. It was nine in the morning. He was so relieved to see her, his anger melted away.

She started undressing in a hurry.

'Where have you been?' He asked.

'More friends turned up. Then a French guy invited everyone back to his place for a party.' She wouldn't look at him.

'I've been so worried.'

'Norbert's leaving for Sabah and Sarawak, I'm going too and I want to visit Irian Jaya.'

'What about you and me?'

'I'll be back.'

'We could go together next month?'

'You won't!' she told him, 'You'll say it's too dangerous, and full of snakes and diseases. You won't want to sleep on mud floors and wash in the rivers.' She glared. 'I know you.'

He couldn't say anything, he couldn't believe she was packing and in a few minutes she'd be gone.

'Please don't go.'

'Please don't ask me not to.'

'Please Mandy?' He was begging now.

'You'll be all right. You have your office all day. I've been getting bored, I need a change.'

He stood by and watched her pack. She had changed her clothes from silk to faded jeans, no longer a night hoar queen. She was just a skinny girl with little tits, a hippy traveller who stayed in cheap guesthouses in the Chinese quarter. She was already taking her suitcase to the door.

'Wait I'll take that down.'

What else could he say?

'Don't bother Jin Yu. You look like shit. I'd get some more sleep if I were you.'

She took off the ring, twisting it and then she was holding it out to him.

'Why?'

'Look after it.' She whispered.

'But it's yours.'

'I might lose it.'

And she was gone and he couldn't stop her. He wanted to run down the corridor after her and hit her and slap her, pull her back by her yellow hair, beat her and strike her, and take her back to Ipoh and lock her up, and yet he couldn't stop her.

She was free to walk out and now she was gone. He sat on the bed and rested his head in his hands

*"See the Mercedes speeding through the plantations along the black tar road snaking through the darkness. See the rich Chinese man sitting in the back alone. The driver is watching him through the mirror, he wonders what has happened. He knows the girl is missing."*

Jin Yu came back from Singapore without his would-be bride, he stopped eating and stopped going into office and his brother said nothing though

secretly he was pleased. He thought Jin Yu would snap out of it and he wondered how long he could go without food.

The morning she'd left him, Jin Yu had called Han Yu.

'I need a favour.'

'Where are you?'

'Singapore. She's left me.'

Han Yu had felt glad.

'Forget her. Come home.' He'd coaxed.

'I need to know where she's gone, can you check the airports?'

'I'll see what I can do.'

Jin Yu had realised his brother didn't want to help.

'Please I really need this favour.' Another one.

When he'd returned home Han Yu had given him the news. Mandy had flown to Jakarta that same afternoon. They might have even seen each other at Changi airport.

'She's sure to pass back through,' Han Yu told him, 'they will let me know. I've called Kai Tak airport too.'

Han Yu had surprised himself by being so scrupulous, perhaps he felt guilty because he was thankful she'd disappeared.

Jin Yu could only wait.

## Part Two

Phang Jin Yu passed his days waiting to hear news of Mandy. In the end he returned to the office where everyone kept smiling like nothing had ever happened. He started eating lunch again with Amir and they talked of business and cricket scores.

Alone in the evenings he drank to dull the emptiness. Each night he lay sweating, tangled in the bed sheets; while in his sleep she made him dream of losing her. The endless thoughts of Mandy were killing him, and to save himself he took refuge in his childhood memories.

Once, he'd been a boy with a future that stretched ahead like a gold paved road, and behind him lay the past forged by his ancestors.

He remembered being that fat kid growing up in his very own fairytale.



*"A world inhabited by ghosts and endless seas of lush purple poppies while women scavenged tin from slag heaps like black crows skimming over dirt grey hills and he was fed upon snow skin mooncakes baked by hard brown hands that melted in his mouth while his mother caressed his brow with a touch like a fluttering sparrow."*

He knew what he was now, a Chinaman in love with an outrageous slut. He'd become the fat millionaire, a man who believed in his destiny and his history.

'The Hakka people 客家人 means "guest people". The Hakka are a unique ethnic group of "Han" Chinese that can be traced to the pre-Qin period originally active around the Yellow River area. These original settlers migrated south to Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong and in Sichuan and Taiwan after the Jin dynasty. The locals called them Hakka when they first settled, they were noted for their preservation of certain cultural characteristics as expressed in the customs, foods and dialect.

During the course of Malayan history they have been a source of many revolutionary, government, and military leaders. The first wave of Chinese settlers came during the Malacca Empire in the early 15th century, during the reign of Sultan Mansur Syah who married the princess Hang Li Po from China. The legend tells that the Chinese wedding party included five hundred men of noble births and handmaidens. The descendants of these people are called Baba (men) and Nyonya (women).

The second larger wave of Chinese immigrants came during the 19th century and early 20th century due to the fighting in the Opium wars. They came as free labour or indentured labour financing their own journey with savings or loans from their kinsman. Perhaps the most famous Hakka man was Chung Keng Quee 1821 to 1901 titled Capitan China of Perak and Penang and founder of Taiping. He arrived in Malaya as an indentured labourer and became a millionaire philanthropist. He was the leader of the Hai San, a Chinese secret society in British Malaya during the time of the Larut wars 1862 to 1873. He held this position till early 1884 although he continued to remain a leading member.

The old fort at Teluk Batu was built by him to safeguard the mine that he opened there from attack by rival secret societies, and he was a member of the Advisory Perak State Council appointed by the British and Chinese ethnic groups in Malaya.'

"History of Ethnic Chinese in Colonial Malaya" Captain J D Hardy 1927

When Jin Yu was growing up, he'd carried the knowledge that Capitan China was his ancestor like a lucky coin in his pocket that he could stroke whenever he needed help.

He grew up in the house built by his great grandfather, Chung Fon Huan who'd had three principle wives. They were all long dead, but his secondary wife Lien Sim was still alive. Chung Fon Huan had married her when he was an old man and she'd been a young girl and they'd never had any children. She still lived in this house full of overflowing rooms and wore ancient silk flapper dresses and buckle shoes. She was nearly bald and kept her last few wispy strands of hair tied in a chignon at the back of her neck and regularly had them died jet black by her servant. Lien Sim's servant would dust her old wrinkled face with white powder, paint her puckered mouth with red lipstick and draw arching black eyebrows on her

frail forehead.

Jin Yu was afraid of Lien Sim because she had a sharp tongue and quarrelled with his mother and aunt. Some times she would spy him while he was crossing the house and scold him for making a racket or for running like a 鬼 Kwui devil. Lien Sim often sat snoring in the jade salon; a large room that Chung Fon Huan had built to entertain the British colonials and Malay Royals. Lien Sim would doze and dream she was still the most beautiful, while the Ang Moh - the white subalterns kissed her hands. No one had ever used the salon for entertaining since the Japanese invasion, but there was still the magnificent crystal chandelier that had come from Venice and a huge cabinet which housed a precious jade collection.

Jin Yu would sometimes go into the jade salon when he knew old Lien Sim wouldn't be there and he'd take out the finely carved statues to play with. There was a dark green jade Foo dog wearing a collar with pendants, its front right paw rested on a floral setting with incised flowers on all sides; he knew Foo dogs were really Lions. His favourites were a variegated brown jade pig with beautiful geometric carvings to the body and a white jade horse and his rider. The horseman carried a fiddle and the horse had no bridle; they were in harmony, like great friends they knew where they were going together. On the top shelf was a light green jade statue from the Han dynasty that he'd been forbidden to touch, so he'd stand on a stool and just stare at the great Foo dog with Buddha riding on his back. It was the celestial dog, the happiness dog and possessed mythical protective powers.

When he was six, Jin Yu began school and Lien Sim would send her servant to fetch him every Saturday.

'Jimu says come.'

She was still called stepmother though she'd never mothered anyone and was younger than her stepchildren who were all dead, including Jin Yu's grandfather.

She always sat on the bed propped up by cushions and would beckon Jin Yu to come closer. He was terrified and fascinated by her long fingernails, but was happy to accept the money she gave him for being a dutiful student. Each time she sent for him, she wore a different set of nail guards like the late Qing rulers who pursued a life of absolute luxury. She kept a black and white portrait of the late Empress Cixi wearing three nail shields on each of her hands; a sign that Cixi never had to do anything as she had servants to carry out her every wish. Lien Sim had been a fan of the Empress Cixi ever since she was a young girl, and she kept the portrait of the Empress on her armoire. Jin Yu thought they looked nearly the same, only Lien Sim went in for flapper dressers; she must have had so many that they lasted her throughout her life, never growing out of them as she shrank as the years passed.

In the portrait Empress Cixi sat on a throne inside a bedchamber named the hall of happiness and longevity of the summer palace. She had a plaque hanging above her throne, with her title written in full:

'The Current Holy Mother Empress Dowager of the Great Qing Empire. Cixi, kind and auspicious. Duanyou, upright and blessed. Kangyi, healthy and well-maintained. Zhaoyu, clear and pleasant. Zhuangcheng, solemn and sincere. Shougong, long-living and respectful. Qinxian, royal and sacrificial. Chongxi, magnanimous and prosperous.'

Lien Chin's nail guards had been given to her by Jin Yu's great grandfather. They were in tortoiseshell with silver wirework and gold overlay. Some had decorative applications of cloisonné enamelling and were inset with gems including polished turquoise, coral, and pearls. She often told Jin Yu that she would leave them to him when she died and his pu-ngiong would wear them. Jin Yu hoped his wife would not, and that instead she'd be kind like his mother.

On Jin Yu's ninth birthday Lien Chin's old Malay servant, who was nearly as decrepit as her mistress, came to fetch him.

'Today you come jade salon lah,' she told him.

Jin Yu followed her in anticipation thinking he would get an extra wodge of cash and was surprised to find a fat Chinese man sitting in the salon, clutching a leather case to his chest.

'Jimu coming, one moment, lah.' The servant nodded and dipped then left him there alone.

While he waited he stared at the fat man's face; he had a large mole on his cheek with one very long hair growing from it. Jin Yu wondered why he didn't cut it but didn't ask, he looked away feeling shy and stared at his shiny black shoes instead. Two gardeners carried the old idol in on her chair and put her down gently between Jin Yu and the fat man. Lien Chin was wearing her finest jewellery.

She looked at Jin Yu and said:

'Today is auspicious and you and I will both have our palms read by Mr To Wong Foo!'

Jin Yu stuck his little hand out and waited while Mr To Wong inspected his fate. Umning and Ahhing, his yellowed horny nail traced the deep lines on Jin Yu's chubby palm, he declared:

'Red and fat, can handle money well.'

He closed Jin Yu's fingers together, holding his hand to the light. He expelled a sigh of satisfaction:

'Good, no gaps, earn much money.'

Then he traced Jin Yu's lifeline, his voice rising:

'No strong vitality, Ahh! Much fatigue! No worries you have long life.'

Doomed to a long life of being knackered all the time but very rich, Jin Yu didn't feel too bad. Mr To Wong continued:

'Head line not joined to life line means great bravery and fearless man.'

It was getting better until Mr To Wong shook his head and told him:

'Ahh! Love line has many creases, very passionate heart, and line split at end means stubborn love will sacrifice all for no good woman.'

Back then he believed a no good women meant old and toothless. When it was Lien Chin's turn she only wanted to know one thing.

She asked:

'When will I die? Don't tell me about my life because it's been lived. I want to know if the end is close.'

After much searching Mr To Wong Foo told her:

'Within seven rising moons you will ascend to the celestial heavens to join the ancestors.'

After that day Lien Chien took to her bed, refusing to be carried down in her chair not even on her birthday. The acrid smell of opium began to seep out from under her bedroom door, wafting through the corridors. Jin Yu's mother told him to stay away from her rooms:

'Jimu is very sick.'

She died as predicted and Jin Yu waited for his promised inheritance, but instead his father gave him a small silk purse with a tiny jade statue of the dragon of the west wind.

He told him:

'It is good that you should have this to remember her by.'

*"He lays in the half dark alone and he stares at the empty space where she used to lie and in his hand a photograph of her in a kampong village near the tin mine and she's standing under the stilts of a wooden house with a roof made of rusted corrugated sheets and a ladder leading to the doorway and nearby on a large earth boulder a man squats smiling and her cigarette smoke and her yellow hair blow in the wind while she grins at him."*

"Chung Ken Quee left China for Malaya in a junk in the year 1851. He had been sent by his mother Madam Lai to search for his father Chang Hin Fatt who'd gone at the start of the opium wars as an indentured labourer to earn money to send home to his family. When Madam Lai had no news from him she'd sent her second eldest son Keng Sang to find him. Still hearing no news from either of them she then sent Keng Quee, who left behind his first wife Madam Lin to look after his elderly mother.

On arriving in Malaya he discovered his father and brother were making their fortunes in the tin mining business, his brother was by then known as Lui Kong Seng "the thunder god". Keng Quee entered the mining business along with his father and brother and by 1860 he controlled the Penang Hai San secret society and their Larut tin mines.

The first Larut war broke out in 1861 between the Hakka Hai San and the Cantonese Ghee Hin. The war started over control of the watercourses to the mines. Eventually the British Governor of the Straights Settlements intervened, and the Ghee Hin was compensated with seventeen thousand dollars on behalf of the Sultan of Perak.

The second Larut war in 1865 began over a gambling quarrel. The Hai San took fourteen Ghee Hin as prisoners; thirteen were killed and the fourteenth escaped back to his clan.

The Ghee Hin retaliated by attacking a Hai San village, burning it to the ground and killing forty men. The battle continued back and forth and other secret societies joined the war until both sides were exhausted and finally came to terms.

The Hai San and the Ghee Hin were fined five thousand dollars each for violating the peace.

The third Larut war started in 1872, sparked by a love affair between the Hai San leader Keng Quee's niece by marriage and Lee Ah Kun of the Ghee Hin.

When the adulterous couple were discovered they were caught, tortured, put into a pig basket and thrown into a disused mining pool where they drowned.

To avenge the death of Lee Ah Kun, the Ghee Hin hired four thousand mercenaries from

Mainland China to attack and drive the Hai San from their Larut mines. Ten thousand Hai San miners sought sanctuary in Penang, and it took them many months to recover their Larut and Matang mines with support from their ally the Ngah Ibrahim.

At that time the Raja Abdullah, a claimant to the royal throne of Perak and an enemy of Ngah Ibrahim, decided to take sides against Ngah Ibrahim and the Hai San and so gave his support to the Ghee Hin.

The fourth and last Larut war began in 1873. The Ghee Hin, supported by Raja Abdullah, attacked with arms and men from Singapore and China. Ngah Ibrahim's properties in Matang were destroyed and hundreds of local Malays were killed.

The quarrelling Malay chiefs who had taken sides in the Larut Wars between Chinese miners and their secret societies alarmed the Penang Chinese. Seeing their investments destroyed they sought intervention from the British to end this fratricidal war, which involved the Perak royal family.

The British called for a ceasefire, which was violated by Raja Abdullah and the Ghee Hin, so the British proclaimed Ngah Ibrahim as the independent ruler of Larut and temporarily lifted the arms embargo just long enough for the Hai San to receive munitions.

In September, a British vessel was attacked by Ghee Hin junks, thus causing the British to bomb and capture Ghee Hin stockades at Matang. Raja Abdullah and his Ghee Hin cohorts blew up Ngah Ibrahim's Penang residence and were arrested at sea and forbidden to turn to Perak.

Raja Abdullah was infuriated and he turned to the head of the Ghee Hin in Singapore, Tan Han Yu Ching, who offered to put Abdullah on the throne for five elevenths of all tax revenue collected between Telok Serah and Krian for ten years. Tan Han Yu Ching set up a meeting between Raja Abdullah and the British Governor, which resulted in Abdullah becoming the preferred ruler of Perak.

The Governor negotiated peace by handing over the mines in Taiping to the Hai San and the Kamunting mines to the Ghee Hin.

Raja Abdullah was recognised as Sultan by the British. However the Malay Royalty declared his accession was not valid, instead Ngah Ibrahim's position was granted by Sultan Ja'afar and confirmed by Sultan Ali.

Chung Keng Quee was ennobled by the British with the title of Capitan China 華人甲必丹, leader of the Chinese community. The town of Larut was renamed Taiping meaning everlasting peace.

In 1888 he held the General farm (gambling, spirits and pawn broking) of Kuala Kangsar and owned many opium farms in Perak. In 1890 Sir Hugh Low sold most of the Larut and Kurau opium and tobacco farms to Chung Keng Quee, who together with his family made up one of the three syndicate groups that dominated the opium farms.

Keng Chung Quee donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity in his life, he had 4 principle wives and ten sons and five daughters. He died at the age of seventy four on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1901"

The Hai San Secret Society.- Malik Ibrahim 1946.

Jin Yu's family were somewhat Catholic and somewhat Buddhist, any discordant doctrine between the two religions was always vague. He found himself being taken to church on Sundays and going to the temple for festivals.

They burnt incense and gold paper money in reverence to Change and filled their mouths with sweet moon cakes. Meanwhile his mother gave him a bible and a small gold crucifix on a chain to wear around his neck. She had been to the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus School, and was still in awe of the nuns. She would sing the school song to him and his brother.

*“Holy Infant Jesus! Hear thy children’s prayer.  
Help us to be like thee, kind and just and fair.  
Guide us in our labour, guard us at our play.  
Simple in virtue, growing day by day.  
Bless our Mother dear,  
bless our teachers and our school,  
and all that we hold dear.”*

Every year during the Christmas holidays his mother took him and Han Yu to The Church of the Virgin Mary at Johor. The church had been built in 1870 and was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes. This was a yearly pilgrimage she made together with her sisters and Jin Yu always found himself squashed into the back of a car, glued to his cousins by sweat for the seven hour journey. The cars set off in a caravan, making a slow procession along the potholed roads, the windows barely open.

‘The wind will ruin my bouffant Lah!’

He sat slowly cooking, while an aunt or his mother belted out hymns for them to join in the fun. When they reached Johor they always stayed in the same Pilgrims hotel. People came from all over, they needed miracles or forgiveness for their sins. Each morning the faithful would line up before the church entrance, and on their knees they would climb the stone steps. Every step was worn in the middle by the thousands of knees that had passed before. Inside the church the pilgrims would proceed around on their knees. First down the right nave, they stopped at the alter, prayed for what they wanted or needed, lit a candle, dropped coins into little wooden boxes, and still on their knees they went back up the left nave and out.

Jin Yu had memories of being hemmed in by this hoard of fleshy desperate worshipers, intoxicated by aromas of perfume and sweat as they carried him along the stone path, his fat chubby knees barely grazing the ground. By the age of seven he and his cousins would laugh and see who could walk on their knees the fastest, only to be scolded by his mother and aunts. This was serious.

At meal times they’d eat in the hotel dining room and meet with the other pilgrims. Once Jin Yu saw a girl who had no neck, her large head sat on her torso and he could not stop staring.

‘Look at the no neck girl!’ he called across the table.

‘Shut up and don’t look, it’s rude.’ they told him.

The hotel was full of cripples in wheel chairs and the blind, deaf and dumb. The lame ones couldn’t do their penance so they had a relative who would crawl on their behalf.

Every year an old school friend of his mothers would meet up with them at the hotel. Her name was Betsy Wong and she was in need of

companionship. She lived alone with her ancient mother, and pilgrimages gave her a taste of old girls school reunions. One year, Betsy invited Jin Yu's mother to come and stay with her and ancient mother after the pilgrimage. So instead of returning to Ipoh with their aunts and cousins they were driven up to Betsy's highland cottage in the Cameron highlands.

That first afternoon, Jin Yu and his brother sat with their mother on the cottage veranda waiting for something to happen. Betsy stood on the garden steps and pointed to a young skinny lad who was pruning the rose bushes along the path.

She whispered to Jin Yu's mother:

'His name is Jagarth, he's the new gardener cum handyman.'

He was Indian with fine delicate bones and Betsy Wong, fat and thickly built, looked enormous beside him.

She sighed:

'I'm the clumsy one.' Her waist was as wide as her shoulders and her backside even larger.

Ancient mother piped up through the windows:

'I always knew you'd be the one to stay home and look after me. After all, your sisters are slim, smart and married.'

Ancient mother came out onto the veranda rattling a tray of drinks, she gaily told them:

'Betsy and I shop together, play Mah-jong together and my friends have become her friends. She has lost touch with everyone her own age, except for you of course.' She smiled kindly at Jin Yu's mother.

Later when ancient mother had gone to lie down, Betsy confided over her fifth cocktail:

'Writing letters is my only private life. I write to the girls I knew at the convent, the nuns too, and everyone remembers to send me a Christmas card.'

Jin Yu's mother said:

'Why don't you volunteer to help at the local orphanage?'

'Mummy says she can't manage alone without me.'

Jin Yu's mother sent him and his brother away to explore the gardens, and then she settled down to have a chinwag in this open-air confessional decked with roses and peonies.

The garden was lush and filled with flowers and cooler than Ipoh. He and Han Yu played hide and seek, they crawled through the mushy wet grass as soft as velvet and hunted for shiny black beetles and snails. Later in the dusk as they made their way back to the house they spied Betsy through a row of dense hydrangea bushes.

She was standing over Jagarth while he planted a row of tulip bulbs in the soft rain soaked soil. She sighed out loud as she watched him gently push his slim fingers into the damp dark earth, pressing the bulb into the hole and she felt moved. Mesmerised by his hands her body arched as though he were touching her between her legs, pressing and pushing his fingers into her. She leaned over him, her nipples nearly brushing his thin bony back.

The two boys from behind their dark leafy screen pushed their heads between the pink and blue flowers, shocked and breathless. Seeing through Betsy's translucent chiffon, they watched in the dying sunlight as her huge breasts hardened, hanging down pendulous and swollen like watermelons, snowy white with large blue veins and her nipples massive as udders. Earlier she'd worn a full corset and petticoat under her diaphanous dress to conceal her true appearance, but now in the garden she was free of underwear.

That evening after dinner they followed the cook's boy out into the garden, they were going to collect night moths in jam jars. They held aloft their swinging lanterns as they clambered down the kitchen steps into the back courtyard. Jin Yu saw Jagarth sitting near the doorstep to his room, half concealed by the dustbins.

The cook's boy whispered:

'The big madam Wong is always after him and he is hiding.'

'Well we saw her standing next to him earlier on, with no underwear.'

Han Yu boasted.

'That's nothing,' spat the cook's boy, 'she lies on her bed and touches herself with her eyes closed. I've seen her through the door crack.' He sniggered, 'She pretends it's him touching her. She sees his penis, long and skinny, slipping up inside of her like a snake.'

Over the following days, Jin Yu noticed that whenever Jagarth dug the vegetable garden Betsy would sit on the veranda, drinking and watching his sleek sassy buttocks moving under his sarong. Betsy Wong was obsessed. She dusted her heavy bluish breasts with talcum powder and wore a frothy French negligee that smelt of mothballs, and paraded among the flowers in the early morning before ancient mother woke. The boys watched from their bedroom window giggling.

On their last evening before returning to Ipoh, ancient mother wanted to visit the Lings for a game of Mah-jong. Betsy said she didn't feel well and Jin Yu's mother went with her instead, telling him and Han Yu not to stay up late. That night after dinner they were sitting around on the veranda playing Go, when the cook's boy suddenly hushed them:

'Listen. She's engineering things to happen, come and see.'

They followed him silently down the steps and hid in the dark shadows of the veranda columns. The cook's boy lifted his finger slowly to his lips and then pointed to her bedroom window. Betsy was hanging over the windowsill like a mountain of yellowed nylon lace, and was calling Jagarth in a silly singsong voice like a little girl:

'Jageee, Jageeee...Jageeee.'

Jagarth was sitting on the kitchen steps smoking a cigarette and ignoring her. The boys stood in the darkness watching, then Jagarth stood up; he didn't want to go inside, he knew the Chinese woman was waiting for him.

'See?' whispered the cook's boy, 'He's afraid of her, he might get the sack if he went go to her.'

They went back to the veranda and carried on playing, sliding the



stones quietly across the board, straining to listen. Later on they heard Jagarth vomiting in the outhouse toilet and they hurried around the side of the house to see him disappearing inside his room. They pressed against the wall as Betsy crept past, and they watched her push a wad of cash under his door.

'She pays him!' scoffed the cook's boy, 'But it's a nasty job, I'm glad I'm no good looking, I'm safe from her.'

Jin Yu looked at the cook's boy, his bulbous nose and pockmarked face shining under the dirty grey moon. He smiled at Jin Yu with gleaming yellow bucked teeth and shrugged his shoulders.

'If you are poor better you be ugly, it's for the best.'

The following year after Christmas they were back in Johor again, surrounded by old and new faces. On the second day while waiting for the driver to bring the car round, Jin Yu saw Betsy Wong stumble in through the swing doors of the Pilgrims Hotel with her head swathed in a shawl, escorted by her ancient mother and maid.

Jin Yu's mother hurried over to her and saw Betsy's face was horribly twisted. It looked like two faces had been cut in half and joined together and they didn't match.

'Betsy?'

Betsy could only grunt and pull her shawl more tightly about her head.

Ancient Mother said:

'She has been blighted by the hand of God.'

Han Yu whispered:

'Blighted by the hand of the gardener.'

Later that evening around the dinner table, Betsy kept her eyes down and her face close to the plate. She doggedly shovelled food in her mouth, while ancient mother told everyone:

'What has happened is a result of going against my good advice and wishes. She wouldn't listen, she's so stubborn just like her father, God rest his soul.'

The others made the sign of the cross quickly, while ancient mother went on:

'I told her, you don't go out in the rain, not in the Cameron highlands.' Ancient mother sucked in her breath through her dentures while the others nodded in full agreement.

'Foolish girl! What protection can an umbrella offer against the cold wind? I said, why don't you wait? Why do you have to post your letters tonight? Why not wait till tomorrow?'

They shook their heads in wonder at such headstrong tendencies.

'That was it! For three days the most painful neuralgia.'

'What's neuralgia?' Jin Yu asked.

'Face ache,' ancient mother continued, 'Then the facial paralysis, the whole left side!'

Jin Yu and his cousins would watch Betsy Wong at mealtimes. Food and drink dribbled out the corner of her slack mouth, which she would then mop up with a napkin.

She wore a bib with her name in Chinese characters embroidered on the front. When she spoke with Jin Yu's mother and aunts, she slurred her words and sounded drunk; so she kept a pocket book in her purse and wrote notes instead. She still played mah-jong and canasta after dinner, with her eyelid drooping and covering her left eye; Jin Yu thought she looked like a drunken pirate in a floral dress.

Everyone wanted to help, they advised acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicines. Betsy grunted and shook her head and ancient mother told them:

'We've already tried everything. If the Blessed Virgin won't accept her penance I shall give up and accept God's will.'

'It's so sad,' said one of the sisters, as though Betsy were deaf as well, 'Her life is over, she'll never marry now, just look at her.'

They all swung their heads to take a good look, and ancient mother clacked her dentures and lisped:

'Well my only consolation is she'll always be around to look after me.'

Jin Yu whispered to Han Yu:

'Do you think she can still kiss the gardener, now her face has fallen down?'

'Probably,' Han Yu grimaced, 'The cook's boy got it wrong, if you are ugly better be rich.'

When Jin Yu was ten, his father put a final stop to his mother's Jahore trips.

'It's all very well, but think of my sons on their knees crawling round a church. Think of their future positions, it won't do!'

The following year Jin Yu was sent to St Michael's Institution. The school had been founded in 1912 and was run by the Sallian brothers, a brotherhood established by St. John Baptist De La Salle. It was rumoured that underneath the school there existed a warren of tunnels built in world war two, when the school had been the headquarters of the Japanese secret police.

Jin Yu's father and grandfather had gone there, and his brother and cousins were now senior students. They boasted to Jin Yu how they'd gone down the tunnels where the Japanese used to torture prisoners. They also bragged they'd seen the school ghost in the Chapel on the fourth floor; a headless priest dressed in a black robe and holding a rosary who sat in the doorway at dawn.

Where the tunnel entrances were, and how to get past the caretaker at sunrise his brother and cousins refused to say. They also intimated they were members of the Hai San.

'They don't exist any more.'

'That's all you know, it wouldn't be a secret society if all the kids knew. Would it?'

Overpowered by his elder brother's logic he hoped he'd be asked to join. To show them he had courage, he stole the bottle of Langkau Sarawak moonshine his uncle kept in the library.

The long sweaty school days continued in their never-ending rhythm. In the afternoons they would wait for the mobile hawkers with their "pee peeh poh pee poh" horns, and they'd clamour into the road holding out their shiny coins.

On Saturdays they'd climb over the back garden gate and set off for Dessert Street. They'd sit at the crowded tables under the awnings, drinking warm soda and stuffing themselves with noodles floating in piping hot bowls of rich beef broth, while listening to the stories told by the Chinese children who played in the dust outside their parent's shops.

One day a skinny boy appeared among them, his face shone like old oily baking paper in the harsh light. Then he grinned an array of grey and yellow chipped teeth and announced:

'My grandfather was a famous dog killer! He could kill a dog with a single blow!'

The skinny boy, his shoulder blades sharp like angel wings, made a fist to show these fat rich boys how. And then he hit a stray dog that was foraging for fallen noodles.

The dog let out a pitiful whimper and slumped on the ground, its back legs struggled, scratching two deep furrows in the dust. The dog slunk away whimpering, its belly dragging through the dirt, its beautiful orange fur blazing in the sun.

'So what? We've been to the One Two Six restaurant!'

Jin Yu had heard his cousins talk of Wa Tow Sik, where they boasted they'd eaten dog meat. He felt sick and couldn't finish.

'Don't you want any more?' The skinny winged boy grabbed Jin Yu's bowl and gobbled up his noodles.

*"Nothing has colour anymore and he cannot hear the bird's song  
and nothing is beautiful and he sits awake in the night waiting for  
the black sky to turn to grey.*

*Before the light creeps over the mountain he lies down and sleeps  
knowing he'll dream of her and he doesn't know where she is or  
when she'll return and he just keeps on waiting.*

*He remembers that last night when she sat in the street market, so  
beautiful and corrupt and wearing a turquoise cheongsam just like  
someone else he's never forgotten."*

One summer when Jin Yu was twelve his father took him and his brother to Hong Kong. They were to stay in a stone castle built on the hills above Repulse bay belonging to their father's business partner Wong Keng Chee. On their way from the airport their father told them to behave and be very kind to Keng Chee's children.

'Are they younger than us?' Han Yu asked.

'Yes, so it will be your duty to keep them amused.'

Han Yu made a face at Jin Yu.

When they arrived they were introduced to Keng Chee, his wife was away in Paris but a young relative Hsiu Mei 'sophisticated eyebrows' was

acting as hostess. Wearing a cheongsam at ten in the morning, she stubbed out her cigarette, greeted them and called a maid to take Jin Yu and his brother to their rooms. Later the maid showed them into the playroom and told them:

‘The children are still in bed, they never get up before midday in the school holidays.’

Jin Yu and Han Yu soon got bored. They were too old to play with toys, but they marvelled over a life size horse, crippled and lame upon its twisted rockers. They tiptoed around the room, stepping over crashed cars and dolls with their hair torn out and their faces smashed.

Keng Chee’s children eventually turned up in the playroom. The boy’s name was Mu Huang, ‘Adored Wealthy Rich Emperor’ and his little sister was Fu Zhin, ‘Lucky Money’. Their names sounded like the racehorses Keng Chee kept at his stables.

Rich Emperor was fat and strong. He would only eat moon cakes and fried baby birds. He told Jin Yu he only had a shit once a week and it took an hour. His little sister was a skinny monkey girl with bright sharp eyes. Her teeth were black and full of dental fillings.

She proudly said:

‘I eat bags of sugared fruit and no one can stop me, it’s my one great weakness.’

She was only six and chatted like a harpy, she asked them:

‘Do you want to play a game like hide and seek?’

Jin Yu and Han Yu agreed.

‘It’s called Sardines. I’ll hide first, you count to one hundred and then come and look for me. When you find my hiding place, you must squash in with me until the last one finds us. Packed in like sardines, get it?’ Lucky Money ran off to hide.

So that afternoon Jin Yu found himself entering the different bedrooms on the top floor. He’d never have dared, but Rich Emperor told him the bedrooms were the best bet, and they did it all the time and no one cared in the least. He checked under the beds and inside the wardrobes, and having found no one he ended up in last room at the end of the hall. It had a huge window overlooking the sea and Repulse bay. He could see the tiny junks in the distance and the freight ships and ferry boats. He stood for a moment mesmerised in a sunbeam, watching the sunlight dancing on the sea. With no time to waste he looked under the bed, and was surprised to see a pair of discarded lace panties. His eyes ran along the dressing table covered with perfume bottles, lipsticks, powder compacts and dirty tissues. He opened the wardrobes and poked at the silky dresses and at last poked his brother. He pulled apart the clothes hangers and saw he was last:

‘Sardines!’ he shouted.

‘Shut up and get in.’

Jin Yu climbed into the wardrobe as Lucky Money pulled the door closed behind him. The others were cramped against the lattice panels.

‘Shush, she always comes in after lunch.’ Lucky Money whispered.

They waited in silence, broken by giggles and Rich Emperor’s loud

odorous farts. Then the door handle turned, Lucky Money signalled to Jin Yu to press his face against the latticed door panel. And through the woven bamboo he watched with baited breath as Hsiu Mei took off her dress and painted her nipples with red lipstick. She stroked the shiny lipstick around and around her nipples, until they were like two bright cherries, then she put on a silk dressing gown and left the room.

‘Stupid girl! She’s going to our father, she’s his second wife.’

Rich Emperor and Lucky Treasure’s grandfather, Wong Yun-Qi, had been famous for his millions of dollars and his eleven wives who gave him fifteen sons and thirteen daughters; having multiple wives ran in the family.

The day before they left Keng Chee took them to his stables where he kept his champion racehorses. This was the reason they had come, Jin Yu’s father had arranged to buy one of Keng Chee’s horses. While the men stood haggling over the price the children ran around playing catch. Rich Emperor soon became too puffed to run so they hung about the courtyard waiting to go back to the house.

Hsiu Mei stood aloof watching a man mucking out the stables, loading the manure into a barrow with a pitchfork. He limped as he wheeled the barrow about the yard, the wheel squeaked sharply as though heckling Keng Chee’s demands to be paid top dollar.

Keng Chee turned around to look at Hsiu Mei and then he pointed to the stable hand:

‘That’s Piggy Chok, best jockey in Hong Kong till he came a cropper at the Stewards Cup race. He’s got one leg shorter than the other now, and can’t race no more. He works for me cleaning the stables.’

‘Ahh! Not the Piggy Chok who won every race for three seasons in a row?’ Jin Yu’s father marvelled.

They all turned to watch Piggy Chok limping along pushing the wheelbarrow full of horseshit.

‘That’s him.’ chuckled Keng Chee, ‘Wasted all his money gambling, never put anything by. Could have been a trainer but no one trusts him not to dope the horses and fix the bets, a born gambler.’

He clapped his hands like whip cracks, and waved Piggy over to join them. Piggy limped across the yard, his eyes fixed on his crooked walk. Keng Chee told them:

‘He’ll do anything for me, loves my children and lets them ride him. Hey! Lucky Money, show Mr Phang how you can ride Hong Kong’s most famous jockey.’

Even Jin Yu’s father was stunned as Lucky Money told Piggy Chok she wanted a ride. Piggy got down on his hands and knees in the dirt and she climbed on his back and kicked his sides and made him trot around in front of the stable boys.

‘Buck Piggy! Buck!’ she shouted.

And he kicked his lame leg out behind him and tried to buck her off but the monkey girl held on, she wasn’t going to let go. Keng Chee laughed and Rich Emperor wanted a ride.

'Nah, too heavy.'

'Go on Dad.'

'What you say Piggy? Can you buck my boy?'

'Yes Sir.' his face was pouring sweat.

And Rich Emperor climbed on the old jockey's back. Bowed like a thin knotted branch, twisting as his legs shuddered, he struggled stumbling around the yard. The elephant boy rode the old yellow horse forever. He was so cruel and he beat the horse with his fat fists. He kicked the yellow horse with his sharp shoes, on and on, its broken leg dragging behind in the dirt making a trail.

'Giddy up! Giddy up!'

And the gross rider hard as nails rode the horse, the stone broke gasping horse round and round in the muddy rut, wearing him into the ground until he buckled under the burden and collapsed in the dust, his lame leg jerked and kicked the dirt.

Keng Chee looked ready to burst from laughing, he wheezed:

'He's a good man, old Piggy. Likes horsing around with the kids, get it?'

Hsiu Mei had stood silently smoking on her high heels behind a pair of black sunglasses, suddenly she decided it was not amusing and grumbled:

'It's so sad to see him! He was once a great jockey. So respected, so admired and now look! Look how he's fallen so low. He must clean the stables and he must be the horse for your children. It's a shame! It doesn't look good to have an old lame man like this. A young boy, a strong young boy is better.'

Keng Chee turned to Jin Yu's father and asked:

'It looks shameful?'

Jin Yu's father wished Hsiu Mei had never spoken. He tried to choose his words with care:

'Perhaps a younger man would be better suited, but I'm sure Piggy is very grateful to be working here.'

But Hsiu Mei wouldn't shut up:

'You should sack him! It's kinder in the long run, then maybe he'll find a better job.'

Even Jin Yu knew old and crippled Piggy Chok couldn't find another job and his family would go hungry.

Keng Chee nodded:

'You're right my Hsiu Mei, let no one say Keng Chee has old stable boys. It's time he went out to pasture or to the knackers yard.' He laughed harder.

Piggy Chock had returned to forking the manure and Jin Yu hoped Keng Chee would forget to sack him.

*"Whenever he makes love to her she keeps her eyes shut tight. He loves watching her in the crowd knowing he'll be the one to undress her. She buys garlands of orchids and jasmine from the Hindu temple and hangs them around her neck and when he lies upon her*

*the damp petals crush against his chest releasing a sweet pungent aroma. She loves magic and rituals, incense and candles. Deep inside an ancient temple in a dark limestone cave there's a wall that's damp with trickling water. And he pushes her against it, lifts up her skirt, his fingers feeling the sultry moistness, slipping into the wetness inside of her. And after they burn silver and gold leaf lucky paper and watch the ashes fly away. He wants her back and wishing for it only makes it bleed."*

When Phang Jin Yu was fifteen he lost his virginity. Whenever he remembered this event later on in life it made him feel ashamed. He felt it wasn't entirely his fault and believed his cousins shared the blame.

It happened in the New Year holiday when they were packed off to stay at the beach house in Penang. That year nothing was the same, boredom hung in the air suffocating them while their hearts raced. The old house had lost its fascination. They were too old to play hide and seek all day in the garden, they felt too manly to stand on the beach, paddling and being smashed by the waves and having their necks rubbed with zinc for the sunburn.

Jin Yu passed his days upstairs in his cousins' room, where they lay on the beds smoking Lucky Strikes with incense burning to hide the smell. In the evenings they sat together and drank Johnny Walker under the slender Casuarina trees that grew dense and wild up to the seashore, watching the flickering lights from the hotels further down the beach. Two of these hotels belonged to Jin Yu's father and they were all forbidden to set foot there, his cousins told him they were full of prostitutes and in the horseracing season the jockeys and owners would hold large parties.

Jin Yu's father and uncle kept racehorses at the Penang Turf Club and that year his father took him to see the races. He hung about the winner's enclosure watching the jockeys dressed in colourful silks like exotic birds perched on shining horses with flaring nostrils, but on the ground they looked small and wiry like tin miners with hard faces. He followed Han Yu around the clubhouse to see if there were any prostitutes about, but he couldn't tell them apart from the rich women smoking and drinking Singapore slings.

Sex filled their minds and made them sweat at night, it was all they talked about. They shared stories while Jin Yu listened. He had no stories to tell.

His eldest cousin Phang Won had returned from his first year at college in America, he told them:

'They do what they want there. They're giving it away.'

The others dreamed too of endless highways filled with motels, the flashing neon signs blinking green, red, green and bourbon with ice cubes and girls with mini skirts and push up bras, their yellow hair in pony tails and shiny corvettes with white wall tyres and the midnight wind blowing through the drive in, the girl's pony tails undone, their dresses undone and their swollen mouths.

Half way through the holidays Han Yu and Phang Won went to Hong Kong leaving him and the others behind. Lying around smoking and drinking didn't seem such a big deal any more.

His youngest cousin said:

'There's a girl in George Town who'll do it with you for two hundred Sen.'

Their pockets jangled with piles of unspent money.

'How do you know?'

'Phang Won went with Johnny Foo. He told me.'

Jin Yu was in awe of Johnny Foo. He was a talented apprentice jockey and his uncle's favourite. His uncle often boasted:

'The boy rides hard and drinks hard. He's a winner!'

Johnny was sixteen and he'd also gone to Hong Kong.

They argued when to go.

'Night is best.'

'No afternoon.'

Eventually they decided to make a reconnoitre of the street in the early evening.

'Do we have to queue?'

'What if there's already someone?'

The family chauffeur drove them into George Town and left them outside the cinema, they told him to come back after the double bill.

Inside the house shop the three fat boys stood still. The eldest, his hands in his pockets, chatted with a wasted man in a grubby vest and shiny trousers. The room had posters of chubby babies stuck all over the walls. A yellowed net curtain hung in front of a doorway leading to a darker room, Jin Yu could see a lamp glowing on the other side like a sunrise in the mist.

'He says, only two of us. Half an hour each, after that she's busy. He says there's another girl if you want.'

So Jin Yu found himself leaving Love lane to end up in an Indian shop filled with billowing saris strung from the ceiling and blowing madly under the fans. The saris stroked his face gently as he walked under them following the Ranjit's Best Saris man to the back of his shop.

He came out through the doorway into a dark courtyard with a row of rooms running along one side. There was a well in the middle and banana trees along the wall and it felt cool and damp after the hot dusty streets. Chained to a large papaya tree by her ankle was a girl. The chain made a clinking sound while she hopped from one foot to the other giggling. Jin Yu stood frozen to the spot.

The Sari man shouted at her. She looked their way and saw Jin Yu. She began to laugh and lifted her skirts up. She was naked underneath.

The sari man said:

'No worry! She my sister, she OK.'

She picked up an empty bottle near her feet and turned it up side down and shook it. She called to Jin Yu:

'Booze boy, booze boy, come lah lah boy.'



The sari man walked over to her and spoke closely to her ear. He turned round to Jin Yu:

'She want booze. You have bottle?'

'No.'

'No worry I get some.'

He whispered some more to his sister, squeezing her tightly by her arm. Then he signalled to Jin Yu to follow him, and confided in a proud voice:

'She nymphomaniac, always getting jiggy with men. We must to keep her tied up. She real nympho, genuine item.'

He shook his head and led Jin Yu across the courtyard, grumbling:

'Big problem with police, she go in road no clothes. I kena punish lah, very pai seh eh!'

He pushed open a door to a tiny room off the courtyard and beamed at Jin Yu:

'You wait here.'

Inside the room there was an old wooden bed with its legs in rusty tins full of water. Later in life Jin Yu would wish he had run away, but that night he sat down on the edge of the bed and waited to know life's great mystery.

The girl was obviously mad, so was her brother who came running back with a bottle of Samsu and two glasses. He put them on the table and demanded:

'Twenty Sen for bottle, one hundred Sen for my sister.'

Jin Yu paid him.

'You drink, it give power.' the sari man told him, then he went out the door again, leaving Jin Yu alone to wait.

The room had a small window with wooden bars and a tatty piece of cloth tied across for privacy. Jin Yu could hear the muffled sounds of splashing, squealing and laughter going on outside. Cheered by the noise he drank down a glassful of the rough gold liquor and felt his guts burn and his courage grow. Then he drank another.

When the girl was finally pushed through the door, her hair was still wet and she had been wound up in a clean sari. She went straight for the bottle, took a long swig and looked at Jin Yu.

'You so sophisticashun wan lah!' she told him.

He had worn his best suit, the church one. He turned his back on her to hide his embarrassment while he let down his trousers. He hoped the girl would take her own clothes off.

'What's your name?' he asked her while he undressed.

'Nirmala.'

He was naked now except for his socks. He sat on the bed to take them off, pleased that his cock was hard. He looked up at her. She was slugging back the Samsu until she'd emptied the bottle. She then let the bottle drop and it hit the floor without smashing and rolled under the table. Suddenly she stepped forward and gripped his shoulder. Her bodied convulsed and she fell sideways on top of him and onto the bed.

He struggled out from under her, while she lay there enraptured and oblivious. Her eyes were shut and her breasts rose and fell in harmony with her breath. He touched her shoulder then clumsily pulled away her sari and stroked a bare ripe nipple with his fingertips. Still she didn't move but he watched her nipple harden. The allurements, it was irresistible and in that moment he was glad she was unconscious.

He pushed up her sari skirts and pulled her legs apart.

Her vagina was still more disturbing, its puckered and wrinkled folds seemed black and hairy, yet when he pushed her legs further apart and saw her hot red labia he felt a jolt in his stomach. He lay on top of her and pushed his cock deep inside, immersed in the act of love.

Afterwards, he felt stone cold sober and was desperate to get out of the room and far away from the sari shop. He fumbled into his clothes like the house was on fire, but then he felt her hand grabbing his shirt tail. She had come to her senses and was smiling. Like something fierce she sprang from the bed towards him.

He saw for the first time she was missing two front teeth. Her mouth and lips were stained vermilion from betel. He tried to push her away and get to the door as she jumped on his back.

She shouted:

'Barsket! Bladibarsket.'

Her arms coiled round his neck as she dragged him back down on the mattress, then she bit him hard. With a yelp of pain he kned her in the gut and she fell crashing to the floor. He stumbled over her towards the door as she crawled after him like a baby. She grabbed at his trouser legs as he tried to kick her away.

Outside the door the sari man was waiting. He slapped his sister round the face and pushed her back in the room, then deftly shut the door on her. Jin Yu noticed then that the door bolt was on the outside. The proprietor of Ranjit's Best Saris shot the bolt through the lock and reassured him:

'No problem, nymphomaniac, cant help it. Always want more jiggy.'

He laughed at Jin Yu:

'You can come any time after six.'

Jin Yu hurried away.

After that night Jin Yu believed he could never do anything worse. He lost the appetite for following his cousins around and spent the remaining days of his vacation hanging about the house. He felt sorry for himself. He knew he had lost face and the bad dreams were always the same.

*'A girl, with broken red stained teeth lets her sari fall to the floor. 'I want to fucking kiss you.' She gurgles like a drain, naked as the day she was born. She rubs her body down with ghee butter, untangles her wiry pubic hair with an old scrubbing brush and he tries to get up but he cant. He realises he is naked, appalled, he yells to be saved but his voice has gone. He watches the girl wielding the scrubbing brush over her greasy limbs, through thick hair that sprouts like fur. She drops on all fours and leaps on top of him,*

*resting back on her haunches, her face lengthens into a snout and she howls at him. The black fur on her neck quivers as she lowers her head over his genitals.*

Every morning Jin Yu would wake with black circles around his eyes like a Panda bear. He dreaded falling asleep at night.

Back at home he made up his mind to reform and study hard at school. He began going to church on Sundays again with his mother and singing the hymns with dedication. He wondered if he should confess; it would be so easy, just step into the confessional and draw the curtain behind him and he'd be absolved of all his sins. A few hail Marys, and he'd be the Jin Yu he'd been before. He hung around St Michaels church after the school service waiting for his chance but in the end he couldn't do it, he was too afraid someone might see him. Luckily a few months after returning to Ipoh the nightmares stopped and Jin Yu believed he'd forget her in time. Yet a few weeks before the summer holidays he happened to read an article in a local Penang newspaper which brought his memories flooding back. Nirmala had been arrested in George Town for disturbing the peace and for licentious and immoral behaviour.

#### **HINDU VOICE** May 30 th

1965

“Police arrested fifteen year old Nirmala Anak lalaki Panwar yesterday afternoon in Beach Street George Town. They were alerted to a disturbance being caused by the said Miss Panwar, who in an inebriated state of wanton disregard was importuning men on the street offering sexual favours in exchange for alcohol. The outrage was further exacerbated by the fact that she was naked, refusing to let the good intentioned shopkeepers cover her with offered shawls. A Police officer at the scene said: ‘Miss Panwar is well known to us, we have had to escort her many times to police head quarters for immoral acts.’ Miss Panwar’s family has declined to comment but a neighbour who has known the family for many years said that Miss Panwar suffers from the medical condition of Nymphomania. Miss Panwar already on probation due to previous offences is being held at Penang prison until sentencing.”

The school holidays were just a few weeks away and he knew he couldn't go back to the beach house.

Jin Yu sat opposite his father while the ancestors watched from their portraits on the wall. He asked his father:

‘Can I stay here in Ipoh this summer?’

‘What?’ His father glared at him. ‘Why you want to stay here? Your family are going to Penang, and so are you!’

‘I want to stay here and study. I can’t study at the beach house.’ He begged, ‘Please? Next year I have my Junior Cambridge exams.’

‘That’s next year. You’ve done very well this year and we are proud. What do you think you will do? Sit about here all day by yourself?’

His father was studying him, his gaze shrewd and calculating and a smile playing around his lips. Jin Yu wished he could sink deeper into his seat.

Then his father sighed:

‘My foreman at Batu Gajah has asked me for a vacation this summer and I don’t trust Chan Hoi his deputy. You can check on operations and keep the accounts. I’ll buy you a scooter.’

So that summer Jin Yu found himself for the first time alone in the house without his family. Most of the servants had gone too, either with his mother and aunt to Penang or home to visit their families. Only the two Ping sisters remained to cook and clean. They were twins but called each other 姐 Zi, elder sister and 妹 Moi, younger sister, because one was half an hour older than the other.

The Ping sisters were very neat in matching dark pants and flowered blouses and they wore their iron-grey hair tied back in buns.

In the afternoons they’d sit on the back steps near the dustbins, with their heavy brooms thrown down by their sides they smoked cheroots with Saman the Ceylonese gardener. Saman was new to the household. He’d worked for a British family in Kuala Lumpur until Jin Yu’s Auntie had secretly bribed him with higher wages; she’d always envied English gardens with hollyhocks, foxgloves and sweet peas.

Jin Yu would watch them from his bedroom window. He didn’t want them to see him in case they threw away their cigars and carried on sweeping. He was listening in.

‘Saman, have you heard about the famous Ceylonese nurse?’

Saman shook his head and Zi said, ‘No, Moi she was a midwife.’

Moi expelled a stream of smoke through her nostrils, ‘Zi, I’m telling you she was a nurse and married to a Doctor.’

‘Maybe she was a nurse and a midwife?’ Saman suggested.

‘No Saman, that can’t be.’ they both shook their heads at him and puffed on their cheroots.

‘She was a war hero.’ Zi told Saman proudly.

‘Now, where did they have the clinic?’ Moi asked.

‘Brewster road.’ Zi said.

‘No Zi, I remember now, it was in Papan.’

‘No Moi, that was after the Japs came. Remember? She helped the Malay anti Japanese army there.’

Moi shrugged, 'We were in the Cameron highlands when the Japs invaded.'

'I know.' Zi huffed, 'I remember, young Mr Phang took us there in his car.' She turned to Saman, 'She saved more than six thousand of our soldiers.'

'Chinese soldiers?' Saman wondered.

'Of course Saman, Chinese, Malay, Indian all the MPAJA soldiers.'

'Don't forget Zi' Moi interrupted, 'the Japs caught her in the end.'

'Yes, they found the radios, then they tortured her husband and children to make her talk.'

Saman shivered and Moi whispered, 'The daughter was only seven Zi.'

'I know Moi, but she never gave the soldiers' hiding places up.'

'How could she resist? I would tell them everything.'

'Even where I am hiding Moi?'

'No, not you Zi, you're my sister. But the others, I would give them all up to save you.'

Zi expelled a gush of smoke, 'She was braver than you Moi.'

'How could she resist? They say the Japs sprayed soap water into her vagina and made her sit for days on ice cubes.' Moi turned to Saman, 'And just think? Three years of torture and after the war ended she died only seven months later.'

'It is a great shame.' Zi patted her bun into place.

'What was her name?' Saman asked.

'Sybil.'

They talked on, puffing on their cheroots, talking of war, pig rearing and lucky moles.

For the first two weeks of the school holiday Jin Yu stayed in the house and seldom went to the mine, and in the evenings he rode around Ipoh on his scooter. It was cool at night and he wore a black leather jacket Han Yu had brought home from London. Then his father called from Kuala Lumpur and told him:

'I hear you haven't been seen much in Batu Gajah.'

'I've been studying hard.' Jin Yu lied.

His father said:

'The foreman leaves tomorrow. You get over there. Abdul Raman is expecting you.'

From the smelting plants to the offices to the mine, Jin Yu found there was much work to be done. He spent whole days at Batu Gajah and Chan Hoy, the deputy at the mine, made him an offer:

'You want bed in the bunkhouse? Long drive on a scooter, no?'

Jin Yu had no intention of staying in the bunkhouse overlooking the pits. It was a wooden shack on stilts. Inside were bunk beds with threadbare coir mattresses, and in the corner an old Australian kerosene refrigerator that the men kept bottled water and beer in. On the edge of the works compound were two latrines and a shower stall. He would be too ashamed to stay there.

He felt uncomfortable in the offices too, he thought everyone was

humouring him and finding stuff for him to do, until he realised that the office manager was using him to do his work.

Jin Yu spent hours going through the accounts, while he listened to Abdul Raman shouting orders on the phone:

‘Wat Lah yu? Thicky thicky! I told no go. Why you do this to me?’

‘You got or not?’

‘Sure ah?’

‘Like dat cannot lah! Big problem Mr Phang no like.’

‘Take the blardy garment geology man to section seven. Eh hello? You blardy listen! Section seven like I say!’

Jin Yu was asked to check the mined tin ore quantities before collection and to check the deliveries at the smelting plants. He spent hours every day under the hot sun; his scooter at full throttle, his shirt wet and his hands burnt. He felt his father was punishing him for not spending the holidays with his family and wished the scooter would break down.

The road up to the mine was steep with sharp bends that cut through the jungle and was full of potholes. As he got closer the mine dogs would run round his scooter. He was going too slow up hill to out race them and they would growl and go to bite his legs. Jin Yu hated them.

When he arrived at the mine the dogs would lie under the bunkhouse keeping their distance. They were Chan Hoy’s dogs, he said he kept them for security and to keep him company as he stayed at the mine most weekends when the other miners went home.

Chan Hoy was tall and thin, he smelt bad and had greasy hair that grew into his eyes. Jin Yu knew from listening to Abdul Raman’s phone conversations that Chan Hoy brought prostitutes back to the bunk house, he also had a wife and two children in town.

His wife came to the offices once a week when Chan Hoy was due to collect his wages. Sometimes she arrived in good time and would hide behind the yard trucks to wait for him. On his way in Chan Hoy would look for her from the corners of his eyes without turning his head. He knew her tricks. On his way back out she’d run from her hiding place and beg a hundred Sen from him. Each time he’d get his wages he’d check through the window first. Sometimes he’d spy her and his children hiding outside and would escape through the tiny toilet window at the back. How he made Abdul Ramin laugh. Whenever this happened she left the compound carrying the baby on her hip, pulling the little girl along behind her, and would head into town hoping to find him before all the money was spent.

‘Give me gambling or give me death, I will pawn my children but please no close casino. Mah-jong, yes I love the cat, mouse, cockerel and centipede. Lets play poker then.’

Some nights when all the workers had gone home Chan Hoy would read Chinese books, he kept them on shelves made of rough wooden planks. They were mostly second hand love stories, some written in the classical language and some in the vernacular. Jin Yu saw he also had Ba Jin’s trilogy, Torrents, and classics like Dream Of The Red Chamber and

The Water Margin.

On other nights he'd fetch a girl and then the bunkhouse would reek of opium.

'Gives them opium before shoving his lolok up their arseholes, makes them Pei hai.' Abdul Ramin knew everything.

As the summer drew on, Jin Yu noticed there were even more dogs than before, and one afternoon while standing around waiting for the loading trucks he overheard Chan Hoy talking with the miners.

'Bitches are on heat, it's the mating season. Too many dogs from other tin mines.'

'Why we don't catch one and cook it here?'

Jin Yu pretended not to have heard.

The next day the miners he'd seen talking with Chan Hoy arrived at the mine prepared. They'd brought their kitchen tools and Chinese herbs. They did not go home that night. Jin Yu couldn't leave because they had invited him to share their meal and he would lose face.

That evening at sunset, Jin Yu sat trying to read in the shade of the old bunkhouse when Chan Hoy crept up silently, signalling for Jin Yu to follow him. He trod behind Chan Hoy watching his feet stumble along the path through the bush.

A golden brown dog appeared ahead like in a dream, he bowed his head before Jin Yu and sat down on the path before him, crossing his front paws and beating his tail with excitement, his smiling mouth, his warm shining eyes, an old friend.

Under the dark red sunset the men crept from the shadows and cast a loose net over the dog's body. Jin Yu mumbled something to Chan Hoy and turned and fled back to the bunkhouse.

They caught the strange dog and dragged it back to the compound clearing. A man untied the net. Jin Yu from the bunkhouse door saw the dog was meekly cowering to the ground. The men stood around it grinning. The dog didn't try to run away or growl, it just huddled on its haunches trembling.

Li Yan the youngest laughed, 'So you think you're tough and feisty? Now you're face to face with me all you can do is shake with fear.'

A bald man crept up behind the dog and with a rusty iron axe in his fist he brought it down and split the dog's head open. When he bent down to pry the axe free the dog let out a dull cry. Its head lay in the dirt while its legs still scrambled with life. The bald man raised his axe again and struck into the dog's neck and blood poured out over its golden fur.

They cooked it with the Chinese herbs they'd brought along. Jin Yu did not help them. By midnight it was ready and he joined them around the fire. His guts heaved as he ate, chewing the sweet meat round and round unable to swallow. The miners offered him a small bowl of grey and shrivelled lumps, the testicles and penis.

'Give power.'

He shook his head. He watched as the others divided it between themselves, their shiny lips smacking and grinning in the darkness. After

he was sick in the latrines and knew he'd lost face but he didn't care anymore.

*He drives past the roadside stalls piled high with mangoes and jars of cashew nuts. She's not there to make him stop. The driver keeps driving and the stalls stand lonely. His memories of her are so sharp they cut him.*

*She has become his obsession.*

*His hunger for her grows every day she is gone, seeping into his blood, coursing through his body. He goes to church and prays for help, prays for a miracle. He goes to the temple and burns offerings and begs for divine intervention.*

*He's a believer. He'll promise every goddamn thing, just bring her back. He reaches out to touch faith. He listens to God's man in the pulpit. Yet he doesn't want God's love, he only wants her love.*

In May 1969 Jin Yu was 19 years old, he would have his senior Cambridge exams at the end of July and after he would be sent abroad to study. He wasn't in Kuala Lumpur at the start of the racial riots on May the 13<sup>th</sup>; he was safe in Ipoh.

**Haizul Bariah 1978: Memoirs in exile, The May 69 Racial Riots.**

*"The day after the May 10th 1969 general election which saw sweeping gains for the Chinese opposition parties, hundreds of Chinese marched through Kuala Lumpur, parading through the predominantly Malay area Kampong Baru, boisterously waving brooms and hurling insults demonstrating how they would 'sweep' UMNO out of power.*

*At the time the alliance coalition was led by United Malays National Organisation, UMNO, together with the MCA, Malaysian Chinese Association, and the MIA, Malaysian Indian Association, these new opposition parties threatened to break the status quo.*

*Radical UMNO leaders organized a retaliation parade for May 13th. I was part of the UMNO Youth committee that held a meeting on the morning of May 13th and our plan was clear. We would hold a counter victory celebration when we assembled at the Selangor Menteri Besar's house. We were handed headbands and weapons were produced, we were unaware and unprepared for such a situation. A crazy mob had taken over.*

*The ultra-Islamic UMNO politicians believed Tunku Abdul Rahman "The Prince" leader of UMNO and the coalition, to be weak and a traitor of the Malay race by rubbing shoulders with the Chinese and having many Chinese friends with whom Tunku was well known to drink, and play Mah-jong.*

*The UMNO leadership denied engineering Tunku's downfall. However in the run up to the elections the Kampong Baru mosque in Kuala Lumpur was suddenly attracting bigger crowds than ever before even during mid-day prayers, where they were said to have recited the 'Ayat Empat Kerat', the mantra of warriors after every prayer.*



Meanwhile the Tunku was busy courting his second wife-to-be who was presented to the public as his personal assistant. The Tunku was already clearly overstaying his welcome. His love for drinking and too frequent 'ronggeng' sessions, his passion for horses and obsession with Mah-jong were eroding away UMNO's credibility among conservative Malays.

In an interview by the Far Eastern Economic Review in answer to the extremist Moslem proposal that adulterers be stoned to death, he replied: "I fear that there would not be enough stones left to construct our roads."

It was rumoured that within UMNO's inner circle it had become imperative to create a major incident as an excuse to remove Tunku as leader; and then consolidate and restore UMNO hegemony and thence the Malays to their rightful places.

The procession of lorries loaded with members of the opposition parties, celebrating and boasting of their election gains was the spark needed to ignite an incident so terrible it would bring Tunku down.

The racial riots in Kuala Lumpur would continue for several days. Houses, shops and vehicles were torched, people shot, stabbed and beaten to death. Official figures put the death toll at less than 200 but many commentators put the figures at more than 2000.

Then came the stories of Parang (Malay knife) killings, rape, burning fires. A one sided massacre on Chinese citizens in Kuala Lumpur, followed by a nationwide curfew and then Tunku's downfall"

### ***Jin Lui Bi 1970: The Peoples Testimony To A Divided Nation.***

*"We hid in a Malay neighbour's house built on stilts and we could see our house from the window. All the Chinese houses in the street had temples by the front doors. We watched through the window shutters as they dragged our neighbour Teh Kok into the road and kicked him down. Some men went back inside his house and we heard his wife and daughters scream, then silence. We watched as they set fire to our house, then they made Teh Kok kneel in the burning street calling him 'Cina pencuri' (Chinese thief) and they chopped his right hand off. We couldn't look anymore. From their footsteps we knew they came right up to the door, but they stopped when one of them said: 'Rumah Melayu-lah' (Malay house)"*

*"Suddenly I saw several chaps wielding parangs running towards our car. They were shouting 'Allahu Akhbar' (God is great). I quickly rolled down my window and shouted the same and they stopped. I drove round the corner where a Chinese woman sat covered in blood she held a headless child in her arms, its head hacked off, lay in the gutter like a dirty football"*

*"Many people were standing outside their houses. We heard shouts and then a police patrol car came by and the men inside started firing shots at*

*us. I saw two bullets hitting our walls. Another bullet hit my sister's shoulder. I felt a sharp pain in my stomach and the impact threw me to the floor. I could hear my sisters screaming, 'Bao Yu has been shot!' Then nothing."*

*"Suddenly the screen went red and flashed the words 'Emergency Declared'. There was a mad rush to get out of the cinema, the owner had barred the entrance but the crowd broke the doors down. Out on the street an armed gang were waiting. They broke through the crowd into the foyer and we ran back inside. I joined those who were hiding in the toilets but I didn't want to die there, so I crept back out into the hall. There were dead Chinese everywhere, some still sitting in their seats, their faces red with blood. Many more were lying in the aisles. Just then the gang broke through the curtains heading to the toilets. They saw me but I realised I was in no danger because I wasn't Chinese. So I plucked up my courage and walked out of the hall. I know that the people in the toilets were killed after I left"*

*"A soldier fired at me and my grandma, we were at a first floor window of the Chinese school where we had taken refuge. The bullet hit my grandma and she died a few hours later. We couldn't leave the building and my dead grandma began to swell in the heat. We tried to keep the flies off her but had nothing to cover her with. We didn't know if it was safe to leave. On the second night another bullet was fired into the classroom, which was aimed at my elder sister's head. She had been leaning against the windowpane and the side of her head exploded open"*

*"We are Malays but still we locked ourselves in that first night, then I heard wailing 'Tolong, buka pintu' (Please open the door!) A Chinese woman with a baby in her arms was desperately yelling for shelter, once inside, she slunk into a corner and just sat there huddled with her baby. Our attention was drawn from her to the TV set. A very distraught Tunku Abdul Rahman came on to tell us that a curfew had been declared because of racial riots. I remember his parting words to us that night, 'Marilah kita hidup atau mati sekarang' (Let us choose to live or die now) I looked over at the Chinese woman and her baby in the corner and knew I had put my whole family in danger by harbouring her"*

*"The father of nine said: 'We were already used to fighting, that is why we could be in the frontline of the May 13 clashes. Those who had not known violence before could not get used to it. They could not even stand the sight of violent death. Before setting out to join the gangs we sharpened our keris, invoking the name of the great warrior of Malacca, Hang Tuah.*

*Violence and death, when you're familiar with it, becomes thrilling. The clash and the chase for your enemies actually becomes fun. You are not afraid of death any more. I'll never forget that day when our gang*

*leaders, Ahmad Chicago and Mat Whiskey hugged each other and made peace in front of the mosque, before leading us into battle.”*

That first night when Jin Yu saw the news on television he was terrified. By a weird stroke of fate he was alone in the house with the servants. He felt as if deep cracks had suddenly appeared in his chest caused by the fear that lay there. He crept around the shadowy rooms, scared stiff for the first time in his own home. From the window, he looked out into the dark garden full of muddy puddles that gave off a dull glimmer in the moonlight. He could see his father's Malay driver Nurul Hamizah standing by the gate under a drizzling rain.

Visions of being betrayed by the driver and massacred by Malay gangs flowed through his head as he watched Nurul slide back the iron bolts on the gate. His heart thudded in his ears, and then he remembered the tiny cupboard built into the wainscoting under the stairs. He waited there forever, crouched behind a jumbled pile of suitcases and picnic hampers while cold sweat trickled down his back. He began to wonder if anything would ever happen and in the end unable to stop himself, he crawled out from his hiding place. Bent low, he tiptoed back to the window overlooking the garden.

The garden was empty, only a pale light flickered somewhere from within the bamboo forest that stretched along the East wall. Jin Yu watched as the light grew brighter, it dipped and floated like a firefly, drifting closer and closer to the forest edge. And then he saw Nurul appear from out of the bamboos carrying a hurricane oil-lamp aloft in the darkness, casting a halo of golden light. Following behind him, was a little Chinese woman.

They stood together by the gate, he couldn't hear them but he watched while Nurul wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and she in turn slowly raised her hand to gently stroke his rain soaked cheek. Under the dark sky the gleaming moonlight shone, transforming the white garden wall into a theatre screen. Their wet bodies shimmered, moving fast like shadow puppets in the glowing light. Their gestures of passion were jagged, their silhouettes elongated and silently moving. Jin Yu stood still, following this madly romantic and tragic play until the very end. Then he watched as Nurul opened the garden gate to let his Chinese lover out into the night.

In the following weeks Parliament was suspended, the press was shutdown and Tunku was replaced. It was time for the new policies granting Malays economic privileges. They re-wrote the sedition act permitting detention without trial. Veto power was given to the Sultans, Rajas and Kings, preserving the eternal feudal system and a never-ending state of emergency was declared.

Jin Yu began to feel a stranger in his own land, an usurper and unwanted. He would never be a Malay from Malaysia and he'd never be a son of the soil. This land was his home and his father's and grandfather's

right back to Capitan China. The history which had been his talisman, had turned against him.

When Han Yu came home from America he tried to tell him how he felt. Han Yu patted his shoulder and tried to cheer him, he said:

‘Don’t be a fool! Its just politics, nothing has changed.’

Jin Yu shook his head, he’d read the papers, and he told Han Yu:

‘The new government policies are all for the Malays, we’ll be second-class citizens. They hate us.’

Han Yu laughed:

‘They love us or they hate us, what’s the difference? We work with whoever has the power.’ He sat down beside Jin Yu peering into his face, ‘Listen; first it was the British and the Sultans, now the Malays and the Sultans. Our best contracts come through our UMNO friends, and now they have appeased the Malay majority and kept their votes.’ He smiled, ‘Nothing will change. So we have to employ more Malays, what’s the difference?’

‘Change and equality!’ Jin Yu spouted. ‘I know how I’ll vote when I’m twenty-one and it wont be for the MCA, they’re nothing but UMNO’s ‘Yes men.’

Han Yu frowned at him and said quietly:

‘They know what they’re about. You are too young and too idealistic. You’re still a boy. We don’t want change. Do you think these new Chinese left wing labour parties will give us contracts? No! We will have to pay. Pay them or pay UMNO, what’s the difference?’

‘I don’t want to pay anybody.’ Jin Yu moaned, ‘I want the right to work without having to pay.’

Han Yu stood up and chuckled:

‘You don’t pay for the right to work, you pay for the right to mine tin. You must pay to eat a dinner fit for one hundred men by yourself. It’s not your right.’ He leaned forward staring hard at his younger brother, ‘Wealth is your freedom; it will take you where you want. We are Chinese and this is your family, you have no other. Maybe one day we will leave this country, but we know who we are and where we are from. If we have wealth we have all we need.’

*Jin Yu takes his clothes from the wardrobe each morning and his clothes hang next to hers. He shaves at the mirror in his bathroom taking his razor from a shelf cluttered with her makeup. He is driven to work each day in his Mercedes and on the back seat is her favourite mulberry silk shawl. Nothing has been touched or moved everything is waiting.*

*‘Ma, I’ve been brought down by a woman.’*

*‘Keep faith son.’*

The rails on the walls were hung with condolence blankets, given by friends and family to bring warmth to his dead mother. During the long nights while the men in the family kept vigil over her embalmed corpse,

they played mah-jong and cards. The corpse had to be guarded and gambling helped keep them awake and lessened their grief. Throughout the wake priests chanted prayers and relatives came wearing dark blue or black sackcloth hoods on their heads.

Jin Yu recoiled from taking one last look at his mother. Her coffin seemed tiny like a doll's box with frills inside. A panel on the coffin lid lay open like a book revealing his mother's perfectly embalmed face unlined and care free like a pale wax mask. She looked so unlike the last memory he had of her. During those long weeks at the hospital in London, her face had been ashen and lined and dark circles had adorned her eyes. His father had taken her across the world to be cured. Each day when he'd visited his mother she'd asked him to read from the book of revelations.

Sitting with his mother in the hospital room he'd remembered Lien Sim 'Old Jimu', who'd taken to her bed and her opium pipe and decided to die.

He told her:

'Mama, you'll get better. You'll see! Don't you believe in miracles?'

Yet he was sent back to Malaysia to sit his exams and his mother followed three weeks later. His father accompanied her body and Jin Yu met him in the airport arrival hall. His father silently put his arm around Jin Yu; in his other hand he was carrying all the documents needed to clear his wife through customs. Han Yu had arranged everything and the coffin travelled a hundred miles to Ipoh.

His father told him on the way:

'We have organised a Buddhist funeral, it is better this way.'

The family bought flowers and Han Yu in turn gave them hongbao, gifts of money in little red packets. At the head of the coffin was a photograph of his mother surrounded by masses of wreaths and small gifts. His father had broken her tortoise shell comb in two and placed one half in beside her, the other half he kept.

After four days they were ready for the burial. Three massive roast pigs were laid out on tables already piled high with food, and after everyone had eaten more prayers were said. Then Jin Yu in a dream found himself walking a few paces behind Han Yu in a serpentine path, with everyone winding about the shrine hall while scattering prayer papers on to the floor.

Outside in the temple courtyard was a small altar where incense burned and relatives set fire to spirit money. Her cousins had brought a papier-mâché house with tiny furniture and servants to ensure plenty of good things in the afterlife. Jin Yu wished he could fill his mother's grave with pottery replicas of everything she would need in the next world. He was saddened by these paper mock-ups forming a childish treasure heap with their gaudy colours burning in a cloud of grey humid smoke.

Han Yu surprised him by setting fire to his mother's favourite bible and her hymnbook, at first they smouldered and smoked then caught fire and their pages like fragile wasps nests crumbled and floated on the air. Jin Yu knelt with his brother and knocked his head on the ground before his

mother's coffin, and then they turned away as it slid away into the deep earth. That day Jin Yu buried what was left of his childhood forever.

### Part Three

Days grew into weeks and still she hadn't returned and Jin Yu cast about hunting for the reason. He went over everything that had happened, he examined his actions and began to believe his destiny and his guilt were intertwined. He was sure his fault lay with the dogs, first the puppies then Sinbad. He'd taken the puppies away, telling her he'd found them a good home. In truth he'd dispatched them via his driver Osman to a factory compound where they manufactured refrigerators, with orders to keep them as watchdogs. He hadn't heard of them since. And Sinbad had been exiled to a bungalow on one of his rubber estates. Jin Yu believed his redemption lay in rescuing the dogs. He'd ensure the puppies were well looked after and then he would bring Sinbad home.

He could tell Mandy there'd been a mistake: The vet had believed Sinbad was dead when he hadn't been able to detect his heartbeat. He'd taken Sinbad to his surgery and left him there overnight to be cremated the next day. Tired and sad the vet had gone upstairs straight to bed without his dinner. But later in the middle of the night he'd been disturbed by a pitiful howling. He'd run back down to his surgery and found Sinbad alive, just a bit dehydrated. He and his wife had been too afraid to tell the truth because it was so unprofessional, so they'd decided to keep Sinbad secretly in their house. But as the weeks went by they could see he was pining. Every evening he'd stand by the door and whine and scratch at the handle. Eventually consumed by guilt they'd called Jin Yu, begging his forgiveness, and had brought Sinbad home.

He knew Mandy would believe his story; it was another reason why he'd fallen in love with her.

First he asked Osman to drive him to the factory. They arrived early morning and Jin Yu was disappointed because the dogs were nowhere to be found. He asked his manager where they were. Bin Azahar stood still, he didn't know how to answer his boss. He stuttered:

'No, there are no puppies. Yes I remember Osman bought them here. I don't know where they are. Perhaps they escaped? I don't know when they disappeared.'

His eyes were cowed, he knew he had let something bad happen. He didn't know why the mangy stray dogs were important. He knew no one ever shut the main gate during the day, and no one had ever fed the dogs.

'Perhaps someone took them home for their children to play with?' He wheedled hopefully, smiling at Jin Yu.

Jin Yu agreed with Bin Azahar to avoid losing face. He knew it was

unlikely. The factory workers were urban Malays; not like the Orang Asli who lived in Kampongs in the jungles around Batu Gajah, where they kept dogs and chickens and wore magic talismans around their necks to ward off evil spirits. The Malays who worked in the factory lived in houses; they were Muslim and went to the Mosque. Islam strengthened after independence had given birth to schoolgirls in headscarves and dogs like pigs had become unclean and weren't permitted as pets.

'Very sorry,' Bin Azahar told him.

Jin Yu and Osman left Ipoh the following morning and arrived at the rubber plantation in the afternoon. The long drive there had been in stony silence. Osman who'd carried out Jin Yu's wishes felt affronted as though the blame lay upon him for the goddamn dogs.

Jin Yu asked him:

'Do you think Sinbad is alright?'

Osman answered Jin Yu's friendly chat moodily:

'Can't say.'

Jin Yu gave up looking for encouragement.

When they arrived at the bungalow he wasn't surprised to find Sinbad had gone too, only this time the watchman knew where the dog was. He told them:

'Manager take dog to offices.'

They drove through acres of rubber trees over to the office compound. Osman parked alongside the building, and from the window Jin Yu could see a pack of dogs laying in the shade under a tin roof. He jumped out of the car and hurried towards them across the dusty yard.

'Sinbad?'

He stood under the blazing sun peering into the turbid blackness, trying to pick out the dogs from the shadows. The dogs stared at him, they didn't even bother getting up, some growled at him, some yawned. Sinbad wasn't there.

Sampath Kumar, the Indian manager, stood sweating in a shirt patterned with soft blushing red hibiscus flowers and he smelt sweet like sugar cane.

He told Jin Yu:

'He gone wild.'

'He's gone?' Jin Yu uttered.

Sampath shook his head:

'No. Gone wild!'

Sinbad hadn't disappeared into thin air. He'd run off to be a free dog, an unchained dog. Jin Yu doubted the manager was telling the truth, he couldn't see Sinbad with his arthritic hind legs bounding about the wilderness.

'No no, he always come back dinnertime. You see, no wild when dinnertime. I give big dinner like Osman say!' Sampath Kumar smiled kindly, his huge ivory teeth shining in his dark black face. 'My brother bring lunch packet every day, mutton or chicken.'

Now Osman was beaming, he was vindicated, his smile gloating and

triumphant. Jin Yu waited in the office and Osman in the car, Jin Yu checked the accounts and Osman checked the engine. At dusk the workers started to leave and the dogs followed behind them disappearing into the trees. Sampath Kumar stood on the steps wearing his crash helmet. They waited together hearing the whine of a motor nearing the clearing. Sampath's brother arrived on a rusty moped with a lunch packet of rice and chicken curry. He laid it down like a temple offering on the edge of the concrete veranda.

They stood in the fading light, an aroma of rubber and wood smoke drifted about them. In the last red rays of sunset Sinbad appeared out of the darkness, trotting through the tunnel of rubber trees like he was running on a current of water towards them. He paused sniffing the air, glancing at the men on the veranda. Jin Yu held his breath.

Sinbad wolfed down his dinner. Watchful of the men, he growled softly at them yet gave himself away by his wagging tail. After he slunk away, slipping into the shadows silently around the side of the building.

Jin Yu followed him back through the trees, holding out his empty hand. He crouched low, approaching slowly, coming to rest on his knees before the dog. Sinbad was sprawled lazily at the foot of a rubber tree, watching Jin Yu with his long snout resting on his front paws, looking thoughtful.

Jin Yu's heart was captured as Sinbad fixed him with his warm brown eyes. He became mesmerised by Sinbad's pensive gaze and slowly and painfully the dog's feelings seeped into his mind making tears run down his cheeks.

Through burning eyes Jin Yu watched Sinbad scramble to his feet, his bony shanks shining like rust in the dying red light as he ran away into the darkness.

Jin Yu called for him to come back. The answer was No. Later that evening on the road home to Ipoh he sat dejected in the back of the car. Osman felt sad for Jin Yu, he tried to cheer him and made it worse: 'You had empty hand. If you had beef in the hand, for sure he come and now in car.' They both knew it was a lie.

\*

In those never ending weeks that Jin Yu passed alone and abandoned in Ipoh, Mandy had flown over the Sulu Sea to be bewitched by a man who spoke with a forked tongue. He cast spells upon her with a slow caress of his silver ringed fingers and hatched illusions by exhaling clouds of smoky dreams. She first saw him near Luzon at a flaky weatherboard station; he stood watching her as she leant from the train window to buy slices of salted pineapple from a fat boy on the platform. He whistled and she turned around and told him:

'I'm going to see the volcanoes and you?'

His name was Jake Spivak and together they caught the blue train to



Bicol, and time stood still as they rolled along the railway tracks drinking rum and playing cards. She fell in love and followed him everywhere. She trailed after him across the Celebes Sea from Mindanao to Sulawesi. Across Java to Timor and then over the Banda Sea to the Maluku spice islands, and everywhere else too.

One night in Jakarta he took her to a backstreet opium den. They walked through a labyrinth of crumbling pathways into a dank courtyard around the back of a house shop. In the doorway stood an old woman with sunken cheeks, her face smeared with cold cream gleamed in the neon light. Her parlour was like a junk shop full of plastic costume dolls that sat and watched from the shelves while her white poodle did tricks. The dog danced on its hind legs for treats; the women laughed and threw fried chicken gizzards in the air. Then her old man arrived.

The old man's name was Gong Fu, he had a hollow body and sharp bones and he moved like a pye dog slunk in the shadows, his bones shining through his skin like mange. They went into a back room with tin foil covered walls, and on the silver foil were pictures of naked girls. They lay on the floor, Jake the man and Gong Fu the pye dog, their heads together resting on stones. They smoked and melted like paraffin wax, while she sat and shot them with her wide-angle lens.

She loved Jake's silver bangles set with turquoise stones and his fancy walk. He told her an old Chinese Mamasan had embroidered the birds around his shirt buttons and the emerald green sea waves on the seams of his jeans. He had long wavy hair and ringlets in his eyes.

In Bali he had a love affair with an Australian woman, whose name was Kelley Mary Lafayette. She was there on her honeymoon and before she went home she gave Jake her address. He borrowed the money from Mandy and sent her a plane ticket in a blue envelope, he told her to come back alone.

When Kelley Mary Lafayette returned, Jake's friend Vidal Bubka gave him a ball of opium. So Jake smoked and slept all day and took her nowhere at all, the woman became angry with him and in the end she went home to her husband. Afterwards Jake sat with Mandy in a bottle shop in Legian and laughed over Bubka's badly timed gift and the disappointed hussy. Mandy listened; glad the woman had gone because she wanted him for herself.

He told her he'd grown up in Venezuela on a thousand acre ranch. As a child, he'd shagged chickens with the local kids, and got beat by his pa when they died. He had a Sufi master who was a millionaire and could split a granite table in two, just had to make a slicing movement in the air with his hand, and yes he knew everything. He told her tales of Nazrudin by Sayed Idries Shah, while she puzzled to find the esoteric meanings.

One day a strange woman smiled at him across a restaurant room and he puffed up like a peacock. Later that night, grinning through bittersweet smoke he asked Mandy if she'd noticed.

He took her with him all over Indonesia, buying Islamic carpets from antique dealers and Muslims. She bought herself a Chinese burl root statue

of a young girl being followed by a lame man and a baby bear. The statue was broken and stuck together with a gummy resin and she got it for three hundred dollars.

The antique dealer liked her; he said:

‘Come back to see me without your carpet dealer.’

But she never returned. She dreamed of travelling around with her mystic Sufi, buying every goddamn thing and selling the lot on the hammer in London.

They travelled down the Javanese coast through fishing villages and decaying Dutch towns. One day driving past the beaches they found a broken ruin on the seashore, and they stopped and wandered through the empty rooms open to the sky. The walls were covered in graffiti of naked women with pendulous breasts and huge vaginas in red paint. There were naked men with red tipped erect penises shooting fountains of red sperm that sprayed over the women like rain. She couldn’t read the Javanese writing and the old eroded house appeared like a temple washed away by the waves.

A family gave them glasses of hot coffee while Jake haggled with them for a silk prayer mat. The family lived in a peeling stuccoed house set back from the shore in a coconut grove. The elders didn’t want his green dollars and he had to take them all by taxi to the closest town. In the stinking streets they chose a red Formica dining table and six red plastic chairs. He paid for them in cash and then they swapped the furniture for the carpet.

They told him:

‘Can’t sell great grandfather’s prayer rug, exchange is good.’

He offered her the opium pipe and she refused; but at night she would stir a little in her coffee and then she’d lie in the hotel room dreaming on the bed. She was so enamoured and when they made love she longed for him to really love her with dedication but he fell asleep and so did she.

Then the end came, he was leaving and they both flew back to Singapore. He gave her a roll of stickers saying Free Afghanistan and they promised to meet in London at the end of the year.

He walked away, looking like a pimp in snakeskin cowboy boots and a pair of mirror shades.

\*

Han Yu stood in the doorway. Jin Yu felt his heart beat.

‘Where?’

‘She’s at Raffles Hotel.’ Han Yu told him.

‘I’ll go.’

‘No she’s not alone.’

‘Who?’

‘Venezuelan man, just wait. She’s on a Cathay Pacific flight list for Hong Kong this Saturday.’

‘And him?’

‘Not on it.’

He never asked himself what he was doing or whether it was wise to fly across the China Sea to search for a girl with yellow hair. A girl who'd slept at Raffles hotel with another man. He never wondered why he didn't cut his losses. He never questioned his choice. He didn't want to stop. He had long ago cast his desire into a running river and let himself be carried away by a dangerous current. From mountain peaks steep and winding, then smooth and straight, through deep ravines where sharp rocks cut him like razor blades. And still he had to go on tossed and rolled in the foamy wave, carried in the water of life.

But he was clever and patient and brave enough to fulfil Mr Wong's prediction and all that was written in the palm of his hand.

\*

He stood in his uncle's office looking out over Kowloon harbour. This was not a favour Han Yu could do for him. Since his father's death he saw little of his uncle, but in a time of need Jin Yu went to the great man. His uncle owned a bank in Hong Kong among other things and knew the right people.

Jin Yu told him:

'I need your help.'

His uncle smiled kindly:

'What's the problem?'

He forced out the words sticking in his throat:

'A girl, she arrived here this morning from Singapore, I have to find her.'

'And you don't know where she's staying?'

'No.'

His uncle didn't ask him what he was playing at, he didn't ask him what she meant to him, he just asked:

'Who is she?'

'Her name's Amanda Louise Courtney and she has a British passport.'

It sounded so bad. Jin Yu watched his uncle, his face burning red. But his uncle never bat an eyelid, he just said:

'I'll see what I can do.'

Did that mean no? Jin Yu panicked, no one else could help.

'Please, I can't go home without her. I'm staying at the Peninsular until I know where she is.'

He nodded and smiled at Jin Yu:

'Why don't you come to us one evening for dinner?'

'Yes.' Jin Yu agreed, his face steaming.

'I'll call you when I have news.' His uncle told him.

\*

Mandy had the hotel address in her travel book, she'd called from Singapore and left a message to tell Heidi she was coming.

The hotel was on the second floor of a back street tower block. Inside the dark corridors she found the hotel's name plaque on the wall next to a locked door and spy hole. She rang the bell and waited.

A tiny Chinese woman let her into the dingy foyer where there was a cracked leather sofa and a small temple on the wall. Buddha was lit up with coloured light bulbs and red tipped smoking incense sticks, on the shelf below were two shiny roasted chickens, a dirty glass stuffed full of bank notes, and glasses with liquors and plates of fruit.

She took a room with a round bed and a mirrored ceiling, the bathroom was separated by a silver beaded curtain and had a sunken tub.

Heidi had warned her, 'It's a Love Hotel. They usually rent by the hour.' Later sitting on the bed in Heidi's love hotel bedroom not unlike her own, she felt warm and safe.

Heidi passed her a tin foil sheet full of china white. She lay there smoking and dreamed Padma was stroking her breasts with the lightest feather duster. And the dreams went on and on.

*She dreamt she was travelling through villages buying old Chinese immigrant's forgotten heirlooms from their children who wanted something new. And the old Chinese heads nodded in the wind like puppets while the hot wind blew dust and sand into the folds of their clothes as they sat leaning against the bamboo walls. And their eyes were like slits that you couldn't see inside shut against the wind. And they'd trade away tiny porcelain cups and Foo dogs and their jade bangles and carved dragons as she put fresh green paper money into their clawed hands. And they held on tight as the hot sultry wind blew their money till it rotted like old parchment and fell from their grip and scattered away like yellow butterflies. And their young son and his wife stood by the gate to say their farewells. As she passed by them she saw he wore a coolie hat and his wife's hair was in a bun and they smiled and held hands and waved to her as she left the garden surrounded by rice fields. And she saw an empty palanquin approaching the river carried by four Chinese men with long black hair in thick plaits that bounced on their backs as they trotted across the bridge with their eyes glowing like black coals.*

Heidi and she went out at night to the bars and nightclubs, which she thought were all called 1997. Everything was booming and the streets were a sea of people. There was nowhere for her to look, she was surrounded by walls and the sky was lost somewhere up above. She never knew what day it was, and kept the hotel's name written down in Chinese to show to the taxi drivers.

She lay on her round bed in a pair of knickers. Her hair was messed up, and the bedside tables were covered with mouldy half-drunk mango juices and overfilled ashtrays. Someone knocked on her door, it would be Heidi, she opened the door and there he was.

His heart reeled over and he tried to smile. He whispered:

'Hello Mandy.'

'How did you find me?' she asked.

'My uncle helped, he knows the chief of the local police.'

'The Police? How do they know I'm here?'

'They checked the Hong Kong hotel registers. It took a few days.'

So he had set the police to search for her. She might have felt afraid by the power he had. She should have burned inside for the love that had brought him all the way to this grubby love hotel. But she was fast asleep. When he looked at her his breath stopped. She was like a dazed bird and he longed to take her home straight away.

He said:

'I'll take you out to dinner if you'd like.'

'I cant.' She told him, 'I'm going to a happy hour with my friend Heidi. You can come too, if you want?'

'Fine.' He tried to smile again, forcing his hands not to reach out and capture her. 'Are you having a good time here?'

'Hate it, I'm leaving soon.' She looked about her, 'I suppose I ought to get dressed.'

She couldn't find one of her sandals and he helped her, it was under the bed. She did her blouse up all crooked and he straightened out her buttons longing to touch her breasts through the silky chiffon. She ordered a bowl of noodles from the kitchen and lay with her legs up over the headboard and the bowl resting on her chest.

'Have you ever tried to eat upside down? It's not easy.'

'Mandy why don't you sit up?'

'My legs hurt.'

So he massaged them while she lay on her back ridiculously eating noodles. Later, before they left to go out he heard her vomiting, then the sound of running taps. When she came back through the silver beaded curtain her eyes were shining like glass.

He followed Mandy down the corridor and waited while she knocked on Heidi's door, then he was pulled in through the doorway though it embarrassed him going into stranger's hotel bedroom. Heidi was still making up her face at the mirror. She had white skin untouched by daylight and jet-black hair and the bluest eyes and she worried Jin Yu. Her hair was cropped short like a boys and he wondered for a moment if she might be a lesbian and if they would fight over Mandy. Heidi told them that Australian Annabel had arrived in the afternoon from Bali and they were going to her room to say hello, Jin Yu was included.

The room was next door, it was dark inside with the curtains drawn and Annabel appeared like a massive fleshy mountain on the bed next to the window. In the dull light he first thought she was a hairy Indian Sadhu, but on closer inspection he saw she had long thick fuzzy ringlets. Her pale skin was like pastry and her eyes were sunk in her fleshy face like currents.

'Annabel's a model.' Mandy told him.

Annabel must have been six feet tall and she held a battered album in her lap which she passed to Jin Yu.

'I'll let you see my book.'

Jin Yu doubtfully flicked through the pages, seeing Annabel a few years younger and many kilos lighter though she was chunky even back then. In the photographs she was modelling clothes for an Australian mail order catalogue.

'How's Martin?' Heidi asked her.

'Jesus, don't you ask me that. Jesus what a bastard! I know he wants me but he's still fighting it.'

Jin Yu couldn't imagine any man but a blind man wanting her. He looked at her long flabby legs covered in old scabby mosquito bites, he saw she hadn't shaved and they were covered in thick dark hairs.

She rambled on, smoking Marlboros and crunching on caramel peanuts:

'Martin looks just like Mick Jagger and he knows it. It's gone to his head, all those stupid surf baby wannabes. He's mine. It's our karma!'

Jin Yu felt disgusted by this ugly woman and her reeking hotel room. Mandy wouldn't look at him but was staring at Annabel, listening to her incoherent moaning.

'Martin was the first. He took my virginity.'

Heidi yawned.

'He's refused to make love to me ever since, because he's scared of his true feelings.'

She went on and on, and Jin Yu shifted on his feet and sat down on the other bed next to Mandy who was hypnotised.

'I need you to read my tarot.' she ordered Heidi.

Then Annabel heaved herself up on all fours and crawled to the end of her bed and rummaged in a huge ocean liner trunk. The seat of her dress was stained and damp, then she fell back down on the mattress and handed Heidi a pack of tarot cards wrapped in a silk square.

She told Heidi:

'I've got to know if he really loves me! I know he does, but when is he going realise it?'

And at the foot of the bed in front of Annabel's gigantic horny toenails Heidi spread out the silk cloth and Annabel shuffled the cards.

'Concentrate on your question.' Heidi puffed, as cigarette smoke billowed from her mouth, 'Now cut the cards.'

Jin Yu watched as Heidi slowly turned the cards over taking one at a time from the pack. There was a hanged man on a cross and a tower in flames. She placed a knight on a white horse above, which she covered with another card of a horned devil holding a naked man and women by chains around their necks. The last card was of an old man carrying a heavy staff and lantern and walking away into the distant mountains.

Heidi frowned and grumbled:

'It's complicated Annabel. You see here? Martin is covered by the devil, he can't free himself from the chains of lust and bestial sex, but the tower

here is exploding into flames. This means he'll have a crisis of conscience, his ego will be shattered.'

'And then what? I can't see any cups!'

Heidi's long curved fingernail pointed at the cards, she announced:

'Above is the hanged man, meaning his secret need to abandon the material and float on the tides of the unconscious.'

'Yes, that's it, that's me! His love for me!'

Heidi shook her head and sighed:

'But we've got the hermit below which shows the renunciation of all that is worldly. It's a card people often get before they join an ashram.'

'What?'

Annabel sprang up and grabbed the guilty hermit.

'Ashram! He's not going to any goddamn fucking ashram! Forget it.' She swore, ripping the card in two.

'I said often not always, it's not a sure thing.' Heidi shrugged.

But Annabel had collapsed back on her pillows. She held the torn pieces of card between her thumb and forefinger and burnt them with her cigarette lighter. They burned slowly to stubs, which she chucked in the ashtray and then finished them off.

'I'll do my I Ching, I need the I Ching!' She babbled, crawling across the bed towards her trunk, her eyes glowing like dirty glass.

'We're going to the happy hour at 1997.' Heidi said.

But Annabel remained on her bed and they left without her. On the way down in the lift, Jin Yu asked Mandy:

'Who is Martin?'

'He owns a surfer's guesthouse in Kuta.'

'Does he look like Mick Jagger?'

'A bit.'

'And she wants to marry him?'

'He wouldn't touch her with a barge pole. She's grown ugly and mad. He had sex with her years ago, he was probably drunk and she's obsessed with him. He pays a man at the airport to let him know when she's on the island and he disappears.'

That night he followed Mandy and Heidi round the bars and clubs in Kowloon Bay. He bought them cocktails and later wandered through the market stalls with them. Mandy became tired and in the back of the taxi she fell asleep on him and finally he got to put his arm around her.

He spent the night awake on her round bed, keeping watch over her as she slept entangled in the sheets. She didn't wake for hours and Jin Yu stroked her hair and her breasts and her lips while she dreamed.

When at last she woke he wasted no time. He packed her suitcase for her while she lay in bed smoking a cigarette. Her eyes were half shut against the pale light filtering through the curtains.

'Where are we going?'

'Back to my hotel.'

'I cant, what about Heidi?'

'You can call her later.' He soothed, 'We'll take her out to tonight,

somewhere special, maybe the Chinese opera.'

While she lay dreamily speculating where they'd take her best friend, Jin Yu collected her perfumes and makeup from the bathroom. He searched for something clean for her to wear, and despaired as the only unsoiled dress she had left was the Turquoise cheongsam. He knew he would have to bear the shame of walking into the Peninsular hotel with her dressed like a prostitute and he wished it were still night.

Once back at his hotel he gave her suitcase to the laundry, he feared her love hotel had bedbugs. He sent Mandy down to the health spa with orders not to swim nor go in the sauna, she might drown or pass out and be cooked. She lay sleeping while Chinese women massaged her and steam cleaned her with hot towels, they painted her toenails and rubbed Macassar oil into her yellow hair. Jin Yu didn't want to leave her alone for long. He hurried to the hotels shopping arcade and bought her some dresses and lingerie while his face burned in embarrassment.

He ordered lunch in their room and she sat on a chair wearing a snow-white voile dress. She pushed at the tiny shrimps on her plate with a pair of chopsticks, and then she let them slip from her fingers.

She sat back and told him:

'I'm not hungry.'

*Her breasts are cupped in the ruched folds of her dress; he leans over the table and pulls the deep neckline lower, exposing her nipples to the air. He sits and twirls his chopsticks, clickety clack they move like magic wands. He's smiling at her and his face is red with desire and his eyes glitter and he watches her bare breasts as they grow. Like a magician he waves his chopsticks pointing at her nipples making them harder and swollen and they ache as sweet as sugar. So sweet as his soft fingers squeeze, gently pulling her nipples in his fingers and she feels desire. Her head drops like a beheaded flower cut by a boy's wooden toy sword. She's sinking and dreaming and he slaps her face, a sting, and sharp like glass shards, slashing like rain. He slaps her face again and she feels the handprint seared on her skin and it smoulders. Her eyes wont open like a rag doll with no eyes, just black cotton stitches in a thin black line. She has embroidered lashes and a red felt mouth that is falling off, she's not real. He shakes the rag doll and flings her on the bed and he strips her. She's caught in the brambles scratching and pricking her, hooking her, and he opens her legs. She's pegged out in a parched desert by Red Indians and they will scalp her. Her lips crack under the scorching sun and she is dying. He wraps her in buffalo hide that is hard and rough and takes her to his wigwam so she will live. He takes his pipe and blows smoke all over her body like hot soot and pushes the pipe into her vagina. He has a gun in his holster and wears a shining sheriff's badge and he brands her with a cow iron. The cowboys have caught her and have thrown her over a whipped horse, her hands and feet tied with greasy string that cuts, and the*



*horse bucks and she falls. They drag her away by her hair and they pour whiskey on her hot tits and over her clitoris, and rub it and shine it like a golden coin and oil it like a gun barrel. And with tenderness a Chinese laundry man carries her away and washes her, lathering between her legs, her lips grow like sea roses. He's pouring warm water over her and into her. He moves inside her, he pushes in deeper and sees her eyelids flutter still sewn tight shut. She watches him though she cannot see him, while he fills her belly with tiny fish.*

Jin Yu woke later in the afternoon. Mandy was lying in the crook of his arm, her head on his chest and her arms around him.

He saw the tiny faint marks upon her cheeks made by his ruby ring.

He dressed and left the room; he knew he mustn't lose time and went down to the reception to book their flight home. When he returned Mandy was standing by the window, she had just put down the telephone.

She told him, 'Heidi said we're to pick her up at eight. She doesn't want to do the Chinese opera thing.

'Fine,' he said, looking at her and wondering, 'Mandy tell me, how did you meet Heidi?'

'I met her at Art College last year, while I was doing my foundation course.'

He shook his head, 'But she's older than you.'

'I met her at a college party. She's my best friend.'

'Is she travelling too?'

'We started off together.' Mandy shrugged, 'After Thailand she came here and I wanted to go to Malaysia and Indonesia.'

'So she's been here a long time now?'

'I suppose so.' She turned away from his searching gaze and stared out the window, remembering how it had been.

Long ago she and Heidi had sat in the back of a plane practising their rusty schoolgirl French.

'We can earn shit loads of money working at the Hong Kong trade fairs.'

They'd chatted in French on trains travelling through Thailand.

'Passez moi s'il vous plait un joint.'

'Vous etes une honte mon cher.'

And in the back of taxis, 'Tu ressembles à un puttain, ce soir.'

'Merci beaucoup.'

And then in Phuket Heidi had said, 'Mandy, Je suis enceintes.'

'Avez vous dit à Fabrice?'

'Il est allé à Bali avec une fille Suisse.'

'But does he know?'

'Il ne veut pas m'aide.'

'Send him a telegram.'

'Il ne pourra pas venir.'

And later Heidi had told her, 'Je ne peux pas le garder.'

'Where will you go?'

'Un avortement a Hong Kong.'

'Je te donne un coup de main.'

'No I'll meet up with you when I'm done.'

'Je crois que je pourrai venir a Kong Kong.'

'No je te vois a Singapore.'

And before Heidi had left to catch her flight to Hong Kong, Mandy had cried, 'On ne se voit pas avant ton depart'

And Heidi had only said, 'Tu veux m'aider avec mon valise?'

That evening Jin Yu and Mandy went to fetch Heidi from the Love hotel. In the back of the taxi Jin Yu suggested they go to a seafood restaurant, but Mandy said she wasn't hungry and Heidi told him she wanted to go to the horse races at the Hong Kong Jockey Club. The Happy Valley racecourse was packed that night and Jin Yu took them into the bar where they had a window table. Mandy and Heidi sat ringing their favourites on the betting forms, nattering with each other over their choices.

'Flash of Tiger or Superior Gold?'

'Tiger.'

'Celestial Dragon or Noble Emperor?'

'Celestial sounds better than noble.'

Jin Yu noticed a young woman waving at Heidi from the bar. Her fleecy pale blonde hair crimped in tight curls framed her small face and reminded him of Alison.

'Who's that?' he asked.

Heidi looked round, she lazily waved back. 'Harry Foo's ex wife.'

'Who's Harry Foo?'

'A Malaysian jockey, he has a ride here tonight.'

'Why don't we ask her to sit with us?'

Heidi shrugged and beckoned her over. The woman slid off the bar stool and minced towards them.

'Karen Foo.' she offered her tiny hand to Jin Yu first.

Mandy was rude. She didn't even look up to greet her. She kept whispering to Heidi and then they went off to place some bets, leaving Jin Yu alone with Karen Foo. To fill the silence he asked her about herself, and before he knew it she was telling him the story of her sad life.

'And I must tell you about my husband and how we met.'

She was working as a waitress in a London carvery in a stiff dark dress her mother had chosen, when one night in walked Harry Foo all dressed in black like a cowboy in a western. His smile promised wickedness, his almond eyes crinkled at the corners and he gave her a thousand pound tip and a one-way ticket to Singapore. Harry loved discotheques and drinking and sex. Every night he'd go out in Singapore with the English jockeys on their busman's holiday and trip the light fantastic. Under the strobe lights gripping the reigns of his invisible horse he galloped across the dance floor, and women loved him. Karen tried her best to keep up with him but never

succeeded, the other women would dance her off the floor and she feared Harry would never notice if she left.

'I shall tell you something,' Karen Foo said as they sipped their drinks. Jin Yu didn't want to hear.

'Luckily I got pregnant before he tired of me.'

Harry Foo married her in Singapore under a bower of red roses and her parents couldn't take the time off work, but sent a telegram wishing her well. When the bump began to show he took her to his family's home in Penang and then left her there because he was on tour racing. Later she went to Hong Kong for the birth.

'It was twins and my parents flew out and met their grandsons and their son in law all on the same day. Mum cried and Daddy was silent.'

Jin Yu watched her dragging on her cigarette, with her thin practiced lips she pouted sulkily.

After the birth Harry took her back to Penang and left her there again, and with all the breast feeding and sleepless nights she didn't mind too much. Until one day she read in the newspaper that Harry was on the island for a race and no one had told her. So she dashed off to the racecourse, got there too late to see him ride and had to go looking for him.

In the trainers enclosure she was told, 'Harry blardi Foo up all night riding Swedish girls not horses. Him and other blardi British jockey on same bed! Swapping over mounts half way through race! I have hotel bill, escort service bill, blardi broken bed bill. No good race, third place lose money. Who are you?'

Lonely and trapped by the twins, she started going out at night to the traveller's beach bars at the poorer end of Batu Ferringhi. She drank, smoked and played poker and got arrested with a bag full of marijuana.

'I was sent to Penang Jail. They gave us course brown paper to use for our periods so we wouldn't block up the latrines. It was terrible.'

Her lipstick was flaking off by now, and Jin Yu watched her sucking in her lips, testing the damage.

'I couldn't sleep at night. There were huge mosquitoes and there was a naked woman chained to a wall, who screamed obscenities all night long.'

'Why naked?' Jin Yu asked.

'They said she tore off her clothes and it was impossible to keep her dressed. She was dangerous, really psycho.' She smiled, the beginnings of a thin moustache glistened over her mouth. 'The other women told me she'd been there for yonks, and the story was that back in the seventies she'd bitten the cock off one of the jail guards. They said she was a nymphomaniac.'

'What was her name?' He knew it already. He knew it had to be her.

'Don't remember, Nima or something. Anyway Harry got me out.'

After that she had to leave Malaysia and could never set foot there again. So she lived in Hong Kong to be close to the twins.

'I hardly ever see them, they live with Harry's parents, and he's really bad about sending me money.'

Karen Foo smiled prettily at Jin Yu. She crossed her pink legs towards him, her calf lightly pressing his leg. She was breathing on him.

‘Jin Yu, do you often come to Hong Kong?’

‘No.’

She passed him her phone number on a scrap of paper; he didn’t want it but felt too embarrassed to refuse and he slipped it in his pocket. She fluttered her eyelashes at him and he noticed she had pink-rimmed eyes like a white rabbit. He offered to fetch her another drink and stood by the bar waiting for Mandy to come back.

Heidi returned alone and told him, ‘Mandy feels sick. She’s in the restroom.’

Eventually Karen Foo left them and went down to the winner’s enclosure to find Harry.

He turned to Heidi and asked, ‘Will Mandy be all right?’

‘Yeah she’s fine.’

‘She’s being sick.’ he looked at Heidi’s eyes; they were like piss holes in the snow.

Heidi shrugged, ‘Must be something she ate.’

‘She hasn’t had anything to eat.’ he protested.

‘That’s it then, drinking on an empty stomach.’ her face was remote as though carved in marble.

‘Did Mandy tell you we’re engaged?’

‘Yeah she mentioned it.’

Relieved Mandy hadn’t forgotten, he sighed, ‘I want to take her back to Malaysia. I want her to settle down with me, I love her.’

He felt as though he was talking to Mandy’s surrogate mother or aunt, asking for permission to marry the daughter or niece. Only the mother or aunt appeared as cold and distant as a statue.

‘Well good luck to you.’ Heidi smiled as though the joke were on him.

At breakfast Jin Yu told Mandy he’d booked their flights to Malaysia for the following day. She didn’t say anything, and before she could find a reason not to leave he whisked her off to Hong Kong Island. They went to the Aberdeen fishing village with its floating market and restaurants. Jin Yu pointed out the Tanka boat people who still lived on the water. They took a ride in a Sampan passing by the houseboats.

He smiled, ‘See? I have bought you to visit the boat people after all.’

‘It’s not the same. Look at all these high-rise flats and the luxury motor yachts.’ She frowned, ‘They’re just like pets they’re not real boat people. It’s just a big stinky fish market and they’re here for decoration. They even have TV sets on their boats.’

So he took her to a Chinese theme village and then to the Peak, where they looked out over the views of the city and harbour. There were American students offering rickshaw rides which depressed Mandy. In the end she said her legs ached and Jin Yu sat with her while she smoked a cigarette on a low wall. She smiled at him with one eye closed.

On their way back to the hotel they passed a cinema advertising an

afternoon triple bill, 'The Evil Saint Demon of the Lute.' He'd watched the film so many times as a boy, sitting in the crowded cinema hall in Ipoh. He wanted to see it now.

He asked her, 'Mandy would you like to go to the Chinese cinema?'

'Yeah OK.'

She drank gin in the cinema foyer while they waited for the picture to begin. He hoped she would watch the film while he told her the story.

But she said, 'Wake me up for the good bits, this is going to be a long day.'

And down in the front row of the old picture show, the girl was asleep while the credits rolled and the secret hero sat and watched alone. Jin Yu knew the plot by heart. He had played Zhu Hen a hundred times over in his imagination as he'd fought against the Evil Saint Demon. He settled back in his seat.

The first film began with Zhu Hen being sent to rescue the beautiful Nui Sat, who had been kidnapped by the Evil Saint Demon of the Lute and his ugly drooling sons. But Zhu Hen was captured too and kept chained in a dungeon by Saint Demon's brother who wore a skull on his head.

A mysterious ugly old woman arrived and rescued Zhu Hen. Meanwhile the beautiful Nui Sat's father was murdered and his head was delivered in a basket to her family's home and the Evil Saint Demon told Nui Sat that Zhu Hen's family had killed him. She vowed revenge upon them and escaped and when she found Zhu Hen she beat him with a whip.

In the second film the truth was revealed. The Evil Saint Demon had murdered Nui Sat's father, then he'd tried to frame Zhu Hen and his family for the crime. So Nui Sat broke into Saint Demon's mansion to help Zhu Hen fight against him and the most terrible battle took place. The Evil Saint Demon of the Lute escaped in his carriage while being attacked by a strange man wearing a huge facemask.

In the third film the man behind the mask was revealed as Dong Fong, who was more than fifty but looked less than twenty because he took a potion called "Look Sum Sun". He told Nui Sat she looked so beautiful, just like her mother and she fell madly in love with him. Zhu Hen was jealous and broken hearted and he left town. On his travels he met up with Nui Sat's brother, Han Ha, who wanted revenge for his father's murder. The Evil Saint Demon began to play his magical lute and the eerie music caused Han Ha and Zhu Hen to attack each other. During the fight they fell off a cliff and were swept by the sea to an enchanted island where they stayed and learned superhuman Kung Fu.

Three years later they returned to town to find out that the young looking Fifty-year-old Dong Fong and the beautiful Nui Sat were getting married. Zhu Hen felt so sad but before the wedding took place Nui Sat was kidnapped by her own mother, Hak Ching, the same ugly old woman who had rescued Zhu Hen in the first film. Dong Fong had once loved her and wanted to marry her but then he ditched her and now, years later he was after her daughter.

Hak Ching took her daughter's place at the wedding and when she

lifted her veil to reveal her old and ugly face a big commotion broke out, and then the Saint Demon showed up demanding that Nui Sat marry one of his drooling sons; luckily she was not there.

Hak Ching told Zhu Hen where Nui Sat was hidden. He freed Nui Sat but he was far too honourable to take advantage of her, instead he told her to go back and marry Dong Fong if she truly loved him. Then the magical flute began to play again causing Zhu Hen and Nui Sat to make love. After Nui Sat cried with shame and Zhu Hen knelt and confessed before Dong Fong and asked to be killed. Then at that moment Saint Demon arrived and they valiantly fought against him as the Evil Saint Demon of the Flute played his deadly tune for the last time.

Dong Fong eventually killed Saint Demon but was mortally wounded in the battle. Before he died he gave a letter to Nui Sat telling her that he'd only loved her because she looked like her mother. In the end Nui Sat forgot her infatuation and she joyfully accepted Zhu Hen as her new love.

The film was over, and Jin Yu sat in the darkness listening to Mandy gently snoring. Eventually the lights came up. He woke her and led her out between the aisles.

Outside the cinema they stood waiting for a taxi.

He asked her, 'Did you enjoy the film?'

'It was bloody brilliant.'

He laughed at her, 'You were asleep.'

'I wasn't,' she told him, 'I saw some men flying in the sky and Kung Fu fighting and a head in a basket. Then there was an ugly woman about to get married and when she lifted her veil they all screamed. So you see? Even with my eyes shut I miss nothing.'

He put his arms around her.

Back at the Peninsular she told him she wanted to say goodbye to Heidi that night. Jin Yu remembered Bugis street. He didn't trust her, so he told her to invite Heidi over to their hotel room. He could see Mandy would rather not go anywhere. She looked so cosy in the armchair with her feet tucked up under her and she had her broken burl wood statue of the Chinese girl in her lap.

'I want to take it as hand luggage,' she said, as she wrapped the baby bear in blue tissue paper.

Jin Yu had gone to see his uncle. She and Heidi sat drinking coffee. She watched as Heidi stirred the coffee with opium and sugar. At first they talked of nothing much then in the end Heidi asked her:

'What are you going to do in Ipoh?'

'Well, I've already seen all the sights, limestone cave temples decorated with immortals, Mosques and Minarets ... So I don't really know.'

They both started laughing and they couldn't stop it was so funny.

'Seriously what are you going to do?'

'I thought I might study Chinese and Malaysian art and antiques. There are collectors, and I could sell stuff in London.' Her brow crinkled as she stirred her coffee, 'I don't know, Jin Yu said he'd help.'

Heidi nodded. Still she wanted to know and demanded:

'I mean are you going to marry him?'

'I don't know, I said yes. I guess I will. I only know he loves me and no one else could ever love me so much.' Mandy sighed.

She couldn't know and couldn't think and she was dreaming and chasing dragons on silver foil. She talked on, stirring together words and visions.

*She's a bride in a white dress. She watches through a misty veil as they throw confetti money over her. She spins like a ballerina in a musical box, round and round reaching for the money. Her hands are full and Jin Yu's dead in a bath, electrocuted by the hairdryer she threw in beside him. He's like a snowy white dumpling floating in the cold water, she can't touch him. She's a widow in black with crocodile bags full of dirty bank notes and she flies in a Piper plane over Australia and she's as free as the birds as she swoops over red deserts.*

He let himself into the hotel room, it was night and the room was in darkness. He saw her by the glow of the city lights. She was asleep in a chair by the window. She had promised to pack but her clothes were still strewn around the room and Heidi had left.

He started to shake her awake.

'Get off.'

'Mandy come on.' He tried to put his arms around her and lift her.

'Leave me alone cant you? Just for bloody once.'

She looked up at him like she didn't know him. Before her eyes shut again she saw him closing in and she couldn't breath.

He lifted her up from the chair and held her close. She pushed against his chest to free herself and twisted out of his reach away from his hot mouth. She felt him reaching out behind her and she grabbed a jacket from the bed and swiped him with it. The zip cut his cheek and he stood there, staring at her, and she couldn't believe what she'd done, his face was bleeding, it was a bad dream.

'Jin Yu I'm so sorry.'

He stood over her as she sat on the edge of the bed, and he watched as she wrapped her arms around herself. He could not let her be sad. He knelt down in front of her and pulled open her arms and put them about himself.

'Why?'

'I was afraid you would suffocate me.'

That night he did not sleep. He sat watching her, making plans, making it work out right in the end.

The following afternoon when they arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Jin Yu had already decided not to take Mandy straight home. Instead he told Osman to drive them to a package tourist hotel where no one knew him.

Mandy said she must have caught a terrible cold on the flight because

she began to sneeze and her nose ran like a river.

'I guess it must be influenza.'

She lay in the hotel bed sweating and her body ached, her legs ached and her head ached. She ran to the bathroom to vomit.

'It must be a viral flue.'

Jin Yu ran her warm baths and washed her long yellow hair and brushed out all the knots. He wrapped her in a bathrobe and sat her by the window with the curtains shut against the daylight that hurt her eyes.

*They sit in the back of the man's Mercedes, the roadside stalls rush by, the windows are open and the girl's yellow hair blows in the wind. This is the homecoming. See his happy face round like a moon cake as he watches the girl. See her face as sharp as a knife as she looks out the window.*

\*

Jin Yu sat at his desk, he'd only been working for a couple of hours but he wanted to stop and go home to check on Mandy. He was afraid now to leave her alone all day. He looked at his watch and saw it was just after eleven. He chose some files to take back to the house and went looking for Han Yu. He found his brother in his office, his head bent diligently over his work. Jin Yu stood there wondering if Han Yu was annoyed with him.

He said, 'I've got those reports you asked for. I'll finish them at home and bring them in tomorrow.'

Han Yu looked up and nodded, 'Fine.' Then he held up his hand, 'Wait, we haven't talked since you got back. Have you time now?'

Jin Yu reluctantly sat down. He waited for his brother to ask if he still wanted to marry a girl who'd run off with another man. Jin Yu knew she was unreliable, rude and lazy and not quite a liar but a great artist of concealment, the truth hidden in her cloak of vagueness. Yet he knew she was so much more, and the answer was yes.

Han Yu asked, 'So what are your plans now you've brought her back?'

Jin Yu told him, 'I want her to settle down. She needs an interest here in Ipoh. I'm going to take her to the orphanage and try to get her involved with the children. I'm sure it will fulfil her.'

Han Yu wanted to laugh out loud at what his brother had just said, because though Jin Yu was clever and determined, he was also a donkey when it came to the girl. Han Yu couldn't see her helping orphans, more likely helping herself to a drink. He knew girls like her. He reckoned anyone could have her for a thousand bucks. She let his brother treat her like a pampered doll, let him dress her up. Han Yu believed she'd be better off in a Hong Kong nightclub with a Mamasan to make some use out of her. She was idle and languid, impassive to his brother's passion. Han Yu was sure she was playing with his brother and in the end she'd go too far, and then it would all be over. Better to stand her out on a street corner in a short skirt and wait for a car to stop and take her away.



He knew that you just needed to give enough rope.

'You could get married in Hong Kong. All you need are your passports, no parental consent, done and dusted. I made a few enquiries while you were away,' he told Jin Yu.

'I thought you were against me marrying her?'

Han Yu stretched a smile, 'When you're half way across the river you can't stop swimming but must go on.' He knew Jin Yu was in deep water, tormented by her, stooping to reading her letters.

After Jin Yu had returned from Hong Kong he'd asked Abdul the security guard not to let anyone into the compound. It had never occurred to him before that she might have friends to visit, he didn't think she knew anyone in Ipoh but he's wasn't so sure any longer. He also told Abdul to hold her mail so he could check it first, he wondered if any of her friends might write. He thought about telling Abdul not to let Mandy leave the compound without him.

'Tell her it's too dangerous!'

He had a vision of the skinny Malay man standing at the iron gate in his gold tasselled epaulets mouthing, 'Tu danjus! Tu dangus!' His sincere dog brown eyes shaded by his peaked cap.

And Mandy telling him, 'What? How dare you tell me what to do! Fuck off!'

And if she were in a bad mood she might use her shoulder bag like a single meteor hammer; swinging it around and around her body, slowly building up speed, with grace and composure, building the momentum, and then releasing it to strike Abdul with deadly accuracy.

Then Abdul would shout, 'Sorry Sir, have to shoot her down or let her leave. Which you prefer? Dead or Gone?'

Mandy had always made fun of the three Malay brothers who worked in shifts guarding the compound, as though she thought their rifles came from the toy shop.

'What do you need them for anyway?' she asked him, 'Scared someone might rob you?'

He told her rich Chinese were targeted for burglaries. He never mentioned the violent beatings or the threat of being kidnapped. Best not to frighten her, or perhaps just a little, just to keep her away from the markets and back streets where she might get in with god-knows-who.

In the end Jin Yu said nothing. He realised as the days went by that Mandy had lost interest in going out and about Ipoh. She started giving him shopping lists and everyday on his way home he'd stop to pick up her favourite magazines, perfumed soaps and night queen incense sticks. He'd hurry in and out of the shops unsure if he were pleased or fed up.

One afternoon, as he cut across the shopping centre car park with yet another bag full of stuff he'd bought for Mandy, he heard someone call his name.

'Hey! Jin Yu. Hey man!'

It was Ronnie Kiambang, the one and only son of Ipoh's most famous actor, Winston Kiambang, who was loved for his roles in the Bujang Lapok

films.

Jin Yu had known Ronnie at school, he'd been a minor celebrity and a renowned delinquent, and throughout his school years he'd got away with murder. He'd re-named himself Razor Ronnie and had joined the school band, only later to steal the instruments and sell them to a restaurant in Pulau Pangkor. He never missed an old boys reunion or a chance to fleece some cash.

'Come on. Lets yam cha at the bar.'

He pushed Jin Yu through a greasy glass door into a refrigerated interior with mirrored walls.

'Jack Daniels on the rocks. Two.' he shouted as he strode over to the bar.

'Sorry I don't want anything.' Jin Yu excused himself.

It was too late, the pimply barman poured the bourbon into shot glasses decorated with red lipstick kisses.

'Come on do you good! You look very blur.' Ronnie slapped his back.

'I'm fine really, just in a rush.' Jin Yu stuttered.

Ronnie grabbed his shoulder and steered him towards a corner table. Jin Yu saw a nasty looking pimp standing there in the dark corner with deep-set shifty eyes and a crooked nose, his long apelike arm was stretched around a weary fat man. Then Jin Yu realised it was a reflection of Ronnie and himself. Ronnie saw the fat weary man too.

'Look at you man! You're so jinjang, your hair is so jinjang.'

Ronnie stood in his pointy shoes with their Cuban stacked heels, and smoothed his hands over his long tight sharkskin jacket.

He boasted to Jin Yu, 'Real shagreen man, hand made in Thailand. Want one?'

Jin Yu shook his head, 'No thanks. It wouldn't suit me, I don't have your physique.'

Ronnie slapped him on the shoulder.

'You so sensitive one! I've got interest lah, good price if you like 100 pieces 50 dollars each. This business can run. You want or not?'

'Sorry, not really my field.' Jin Yu mumbled, turning away from the smell of rank fish.

Ronnie agreed, 'I know you man. You like to play safe. I take the risks!' he stuck his finger in his nostril, 'You see this nose? It was born straight!' he lowered his voice, 'I ask you how many idiots have I head butted in my line of business? I live on the edge man.'

Jin Yu looked at his watch, 'Sorry I'm late. I have to meet someone, perhaps I'll see you again some time soon.'

Ronnie unrolled his lips, blinding Jin Yu with his smile. His front teeth were capped in gold. Jin Yu took a step away seeing an evil goblin draped in a shiny green shark's skin that gave off a rotten smell.

'No worries!' Ronnie quipped, 'I'm bound to see you at the next St Michaels reunion. Very bad for you lah? Last time that bapok cissy Hoi Fat was sick on you, very comot, very messy!'

Ronnie looked over Jin Yu's shoulder through the glass doors into the

street. He waved his thumb in the air and spat, 'I hate Hoi Fat! Always so kapster, now big shit! He's Pondan! Homo! You read the newspaper?'

Jin Yu hadn't, he put his drink down and told Ronnie, 'Nice to have seen you, but I must go now.'

'Shit! I forgot my wallet. You borrow me five dollars? Can or not?' Ronnie asked him.

Jin Yu threw a ten down on the table.

'Wait!' Ronnie coaxed, 'I want informasi on hot shares.'

Ronnie followed him out through the door into the street. A man sat astride a motorbike, he was waiting at the kerb revving his engine. Jin Yu couldn't see his face as his helmet visor was black.

'Can not talk anymore.' Ronnie shouted over the roaring motor, 'My partner's waiting. Call me with some hot tips.' he climbed on behind the rider and they rode away.

That night when Jin Yu got home he saw it was true.

### **KL Times** August 4th

"Ahmed Hussein MJP leader has been formally charged with Sodomy- carnal intercourse against the order of nature- and will appear at the Jalan Datok court complex later today. Yesterday morning he was arrested at his hotel in Johor in a massive police operation. A contingent of 30 unmarked police cars with 90 balaclava-clad commandos arrived at the Palm View Residence before dawn. They cordoned off the hotel's perimeter knowing Hussein to be inside, then they abseiled down the side of the building and broke in through the window into Hussein's suite.

During the arrest 8 mattresses were seized from various rooms and sent to the KL Forensic unit for testing while Hussein remains remanded in custody at KL Central Police headquarters.

Chung Hoi Fat MJP Member of Parliament for Tipah and close aide of Hussein was also arrested under the sodomy act at his home in Ipoh yesterday.

Deputy Police chief Abdul Omar told reporters "A mattress and various personal items have been taken into custody for forensic testing and Mr Chung Hoi Fat is being held at Penang prison until full charges are formulated"

Late last night the Minister for Home Affairs

issued a statement “This is shocking, but I can’t say we are surprised, there may even be a question of someone being sodomised against their consent”

Meanwhile Hussein’s Lawyer, Trevor Kumar, has issued a formal complaint that Mr Hussein is being kept in a lockup meant for hardcore criminals and is forced to sleep on a cement floor.”

\*

Jin Yu asked Mandy to go with him to the Lions Club fundraising flower show. She wasn’t interested. He told her it would be held at the Royal Ipoh club and the Sultan would surely be there as patron. She said she didn’t care. Jin Yu said he didn’t care either, but his family donated each year and sat on the panel of judges and Han Yu had given him no choice.

Not giving up Jin Yu showed her a local newspaper.

‘You love traditional Malay regalia and ethnic costumes. Look, a real living sultan.’ he coaxed.

Mandy peered closely at the Sultan and his son, His Royal Highness Raja Muda.

‘You mean they’ll actually come to a flower show dressed like this?’

They were dressed in silk pantaloons and tunics decorated with sashes and jewelled brooches, they had keris daggers in their belts and wore tengkolok headdresses reminding her of the Sultan in Disney’s Aladdin.

‘Maybe he’ll be wearing a suit, but maybe not.’

Mandy narrowed her eyes, ‘I might come.’

To close the deal Jin Yu bought her a white silk sundress embroidered with golden sunflowers and a ruby pendant.

‘Why don’t you wear your engagement ring?’

He held it out to her in his plump palm, a hand without gaps that could hold water and money. She stared at the ring then took it and put it on her ring finger, her face was like stone.

‘Do you know we can get married in Hong Kong? I thought maybe next week.’

She tilted her hand watching the stones flash in the light like a secret signal.

‘Do you still want to marry me?’

His heart pained him but he had to ask.

She smiled, ‘Yes of course I do.’

‘Are you happy?’

‘Yes of course I am.’

She twirled around in her sundress holding the skirt high and sang in a hoarse out of tune voice like a rusty guitar string:

‘Look Mama! Look how beautiful I am,

dressed all in white, with flowers and perfume.  
See my precious jewellery, I glitter with gold.  
Day and night they all smile and serve me,  
and they call me Lady Madam.  
In the morning when I wake, I'm so capricious,  
and after an hour I don't know what.  
In the afternoon I play mah-jong and drink gin,  
and at night I sleep in silk pyjamas on a feather bed.  
Every Sunday I drive around town in a Mercedes-Benz  
and everyone waves.'

She fell back down on the bed laughing, and Jin Yu smiled feeling pleased with her.

The following day they went together to the Flower show. Jin Yu was kept busy judging and he soon lost sight of Mandy. She was tired of standing at his side and wandered away. She walked through rows of brilliant flowers, dazzled by the myriads of waxy shining sticky blooms that filled her mouth with a pungent air and sharp wet scent flew up her nose leaving her excited. She trod lightly along a path of fallen petals to a palm courtyard full of shadow. There she saw a man in a suit and tie, idly leaning against a stone column. He held a glass of whisky, swirling the ice cubes around making a tinkling sound in the glass. He had long jet-black hair and eyes like almonds.

He looked towards Mandy.

'Escaping the tedious crowd?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Come and have a drink with me.'

He led her between the columns into an empty bar that was dark and yellowed. Creaking, rusting ceiling fans blew the odours of mildew and old leather over her damp skin.

He threw himself down on an old chesterfield sofa and she perched on the edge of a club chair opposite him. She spread out her skirt, arranging the sunflowers like a flower display.

A waiter stood close by watching them. He was a bad-looking dwarf, wearing a child sized white sarong and jacket.

'Bring a bottle of Champagne.' The man ordered the dwarf without turning his head to look at him. Then he smiled at Mandy, leaning forward to offer her a cigarette.

'I'm here with my cousin Prince Abdullah,' he told her, 'he's attending the flower show with his father. He should be done by five and then we're off to the highlands. Would you like to come too?'

The dwarf returned with a bottle of Champagne in an ice bucket and two glasses. They watched him fumbling, uncorking the bottle with short and stumpy fingers.

'Leave it and go,' the man said.

The dwarf hobbled away, while he poured Mandy a glass of Champagne then one for himself.

'Here's to us.' Then he said, 'Do you know I'm a Sultan?'

She said, 'Do you want me to curtsy?'

Jin Yu was standing on the path, he could see into the palm courtyard. He watched the girl with yellow hair emerge like a sunrise from a dark doorway. She stood glittering as the sunlight shone through the palm leaves in thick stripes of light and shadow painting her skin with the black and gold stripes of a tiger. A rank smell of mould and rotting fruit floated in the air. He watched as the Sultan gripped her wrist, watched while they laughed, watched as she walked away back to the flower show, watched the Sultan following her with his eyes before he returned to the dark interior of the bar.

*That night he waits on the opium bed calling for her to come to him. She stands close to the bed. He tells her, 'Lay down naked by my side.' She unties the straps of her sundress and it slips to the floor in a crumpled pile of flowers. She lies down beside him tense and cool. He kneels over her and touches her breasts, tiny buds that as he strokes them they harden like unripe plums. He gathers her to him holding her hair in his hand and whispers, 'For just one moment be my good girl.'*

The following day a postcard arrived for Mandy, it was from someone called Fabrice and he threw it in the bin. Later at his office he began to worry she would find it and rushed back to the house. He fished it out of the pedal bin, and remembering Annabel and the Hermit he set fire to it over the gas ring in the kitchen. His heart thumped in case Mandy caught him at it. He heard a door creak and realised Padma was watching him from the doorway to her room. He ignored her, concentrating on the bluey gas flames licking the postcard picture of the Taj Mahal. He burnt the message 'Meet me, Dias hotel New Delhi first week September.' to cinders. Then he rinsed his hands under the tap, the air was acrid making his eyes smart.

He turned to Padma, 'Clean up these ashes.'

Three days later a letter arrived for Mandy from Hong Kong; it was in a pale blue airmail envelope with red, white and blue stripy edges. He took it with him to the office. He first thought about steaming it open and if it were harmless to reseal it and give it to her. But he had no kettle in his office and decided it was too risky to sneak into the kitchen at night, so he ripped it open. He knew it was from Heidi before he'd even read her signature.

Hope you're well, all's well here! Guess what? I've met a Canadian guy called Reinhard with a big sailing yacht and he's

mad about me. Need I say more? I've moved out of the love hotel and now I'm living in a flat overlooking harbour, address on back of envelope. Even better, I've got a job as a bunny girl at the Gong bar in Kowloon, Karen Foo got me in, and tips are mega!!! Now for my juiciest news, do you remember Annabel? Well she finally lost the plot, Karen went with her to Indonesia last month and told me everything.

When they arrived in Bali, Annabel started wearing a coat, can you imagine in that heat? Then she stopped washing and changing her clothes and began to stink like a rotting fish. Martin barred her from his guesthouse and no one else would let her in anywhere because of the smell. She got chucked out of the hotel where they were staying too, but found a Balinese family who rented her a thatched chicken hut in their garden to sleep in.

She started walking round the island wheeling her ocean liner trunk with her because she was too scared to leave it in the hut, seeing as you could kick a hole in the side and steal her mildewed cocktail dresses which didn't fit her anymore. She wheeled her trunk behind her round

Kuta and Legian, unwashed and reeking, the local kids started throwing old veg and fruit at her when she passed by. The final came when they caught her taking a shower fully dressed in her filthy winter overcoat in a five star hotel fitness centre. The police kept her in Denpasar jail but there was a bit of confusion over repatriating her. They had to wait for an Australian embassy attaché to fly down from Jakarta and sign for her. The only bloke high up enough, besides the Ambassador who couldn't, was away on home leave so it took two weeks.

The others in the jail complained about the smell and she wouldn't take her clothes off and they didn't like to touch her, so they used power hoses on her twice a day through the bars of her cell.

Karen heard it from a woman who's husband works in the jail office, so she got up a collection for Annabel. Nearly everyone who knew her gave a few dollars, even Martin contributed 50 bucks, and with the money Karen paid to have her kept in a psychiatric centre run by monks.

No one knows what happened to her there but eventually she was flown to Hong Kong, Singapore refused to have her land and



there weren't any direct flights to Sydney. She was here in the Hong Kong General Psychiatric wing for three days till her mother arrived to take her on the long haul back home. I went to visit her in the hospital, I don't know what else they did to her in the Bali Looney bin but they've shaved off all her hair, she's as bald as a coot, maybe she had lice by then.

I tried talking to her but she rambled on about Martin and kept dozing off, she was under heavy sedation. The nurse told me she arrived in a straight jacket because the airline people were concerned the medication might have worn off during the flight, and apparently she's sporadically violent and it took five monks to bring her down. Well she always was a big girl.

Enough of that, I'm thinking I might join Reinhard on his yacht, he's planning on sailing across the China Sea to Malaysia. I could visit you in Ipoh from mid to end of October. I can get the train up from Jahore, and then if you're interested we could both meet up with Reinhard in Singapore afterwards. He's sailing round the Celebes with the Bugis pirates from November, how do you fancy that? Our year round tickets don't expire till Dec 31st.

## Let me know asap, Love Heidi"

Jin Yu's hand trembled as rage flushed through his veins. He tore the letter to shreds and having no lighter or matches he went into Han Yu's office, and burnt the scraps of paper at his ancestors altar.

That evening he told her:

'We should leave for Hong Kong soon.'

'I don't know.' She puckered her soft lips and sighed, 'I hate Hong Kong it's so ugly.'

'We only need to stay there a couple of days, just to register our wedding date.' He tried to sweeten her up, 'A month later we can fly in, get married and then I'll take you on a beautiful honeymoon.'

'I don't like honeymoons,' she frowned at him, 'all those stupid couples having a bloody honeymoon with other bloody honeymooners. I've seen them in the hotels in Bali, they're pathetic and the name honey plus moon makes my skin crawl.'

She stood up putting her hands on her hips, a grin spread across her face, 'Oh Hi honey, I'm on honeymoon, I'm just so moony about my honey and she can't stop mooning about me either.' She pointed at Jin Yu. 'Did you know mooning means flashing your bare butt at someone?'

'Really? Well we could go travelling then.' He wouldn't give up.

'Maybe.' Her eyes lit up, 'I've always wanted to go to Easter Island and see those enormous heads.'

'Fine.' He sighed with relief, 'I'll get Amir to arrange it with the travel agency. So how about it? Shall I book our flights to Hong Kong for tomorrow?'

'No. First I want to spend a few days just relaxing at the beach house. We can go next week and I'll write to Heidi. She can be my bridesmaid.'

'Fine.' he said again, because he knew Mandy's letter wouldn't reach her, she didn't know Heidi had moved to a new flat and it wouldn't be difficult to keep them apart.

\*

They sat together on the veranda of the beach house while the sea churned and swelled. The endless waves smashed on the shore, hissing and sucking then pounding the sand. Mandy was reading a newspaper. Jin Yu was checking his accounts.

She interrupted him:

'Listen! Hari Amroliwallah, Hindu truck driver from Kuala Mudah ran over a 28 foot long reticulated python killing it. He was stuck in a heavy traffic jam caused by a pregnant snake lying in the middle of the road. Everyone was waiting for the snake to eventually move on, but Mr Amroliwallah impatient to carry out his deliveries drove over the pregnant snake, despite the other drivers imploring him not to kill the innocent

mother.'

'So?' he waited to hear to hear the rest.

She continued reading:

'What happened a few months later was totally unexpected, as he received news that his pregnant wife had given birth to a child with a snake's head and a scaly skin. The snake's curse has remained active and the child, who is now two, regularly sheds its skin, which has massive diamond shaped scales similar to the python's distinct markings. Since then Mr Amroliwallah has repented, and he has pulled out all his hair in despair but the curse still holds strong.'

Mandy held up the newspaper showing a photograph of a skinny child with blotchy scaly skin. Its head was similar to a snake's head with bulbous eyes, no eyebrows and no hair. Its skull was scaly and shrunken. The child had no ears and no nose, just holes and its lips were stretched into a hideous grimace.

He shook his head and huffed:

'It looks like he has Harlequin disorder. You can't believe half the stories these regional papers print.'

He smiled, humouring her.

She scowled:

'So what? Even if it is this Harlequin disorder, why him? And why just after his father killed a pregnant snake?'

She didn't expect nor want an answer and changed the newspaper. She had a pile of them on the table. Silence settled once more filled by the sound of waves breaking on the beach, and Jin Yu immersed himself back in his accounts. Then she broke into his thoughts once more.

'I can't believe it!' she gasped, 'Listen, Aysha Bint Suleiman has pleaded guilty to drinking beer in a bar at Lumut beach, where she was caught during a raid last month carried out by the Islamic police. The Islamic high court has sentenced her to seven strokes of the cane.'

'It's very sad,' he mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

'Sad? Aysha Bint Suleiman says she will be extremely happy to receive her punishment. She has asked that her caning be carried out in public so that she may serve as a warning to all other Muslim women who might be tempted to follow the path of her evil wrong doing.'

She stood up, still reading as though she were lecturing him:

'Earlier this year three women from the Northern state of Kedah were caned for having extra marital sex. In fact our Islamic Department enforcement officers say there is a growing number of morally lax Muslim families, and they've increased their raids on bars and hotels to catch Muslim couples in compromising acts and drinking alcohol.'

Mandy threw down the newspaper, glaring at Jin Yu, waiting for him to tell her it wasn't true. He made a wry face and shrugged his shoulders.

She told him:

'I need a gin and tonic before I can go on reading.'

A few minutes later she came back with two full glasses and handed one to Jin Yu, and then she asked him:

'Why doesn't everyone convert to Christianity or Buddhism and have love affairs, get drunk and eat fried pork in peace?'

He sighed and told her:

If you're born an ethnic Malay you must remain a Muslim. You can't change your religion or you'll be fined, imprisoned or flogged. And you must submit to the Sharia laws.'

'What about Chinese?'

'Oh we can convert to Islam, but there are no queues to do so.'

He watched her drain her glass and start reading yet another paper, he wished she'd stop. He didn't want her to read these things, but there was no stopping her.

'Chung Hoi Fat, that bloke you know, he's in prison for sodomy. Though they're suggesting he might have been raped by his leader.'

She looked at him as though it were his fault, she scoffed:

'There's no end to what's illegal here. This'll be interesting! One's Muslim and one's a Buddhist. They'll get different sentences. The Buddhist will get jail and the Muslim will get his cock chopped off.'

'For God's sake Mandy!'

'Of course, sorry I forgot. Isn't he your old school friend? Did you have it off with him the night you went to his house? Don't forget you came back wearing a tea towel.'

'It wasn't a tea towel,' he protested.

'It looked like one! And what were you up to last time we were here? Helping him with furniture removals in the middle of the night?'

'What?' He looked at her trying to see if she were serious, she was grinning at him now.

'Just winding you up. Though there is something you're not telling me.'

He knew if there were anyone in the world he could tell it would have to be her. Maybe it was the gin or maybe the time had come, and as he spoke it felt like he were telling himself:

'It's a long story. I knew him at school. He's a few years younger than me, he looked up to me and it was like having a younger brother. I encouraged him to tag along with us.' He smiled remembering, 'He was clever and sharp and also a good Mah-jong player. We used to play for money in the back of a cafe on the Kinta riverbank instead of going to school.'

Jin Yu stopped. He didn't want to say anymore.

'So what's the big deal?'

She sat down on the arm of his chair and he could smell her perfume. He cleared his throat and went on:

'He got in debt to a bent moneylender called Chen Cheung. I didn't know at the time but I should have seen something was wrong because he and Chen Cheung tried cheating me in a Mah-jong game. Hoi Fat had to pay him back with sex or help him swindle me. I fell out with him because he'd betrayed me and I only found out the truth a few months ago.' He grimaced, 'I'm sure he wasn't born gay. He told me he had an English wife when he was living in the UK, but I think his father and Chen Cheung

ruined him and Hoi Fat couldn't ever get over it.'

'Did his dad have sex with him too?'

'Hell no! At least I don't think so. His father despised him and he wasn't even his real father. Hoi Fat's life is like an onion, you reveal a layer, yet there's another and still another.'

She stood up, smoothing her skirt over her thighs and said:

'You should go and see him in jail.'

'I can't.'

'Why are you still mad at him?'

'No, not any longer. On the night of the school play we got drunk and he was sick on me. I guess I forgave him then but I knew he was heading for trouble and I wanted to stay out of it.'

He stood up too and they stood facing each other.

He told her:

'Last time we were here in Penang I helped him throw a mattress in a lake. It's hard for me to refuse him.'

'So go and see him.'

'I can't. He's in jail on sodomy charges but that's not the real reason he's there, it's because he's made enemies.' His face hardened and he wouldn't look at her, 'I can't afford to visit him, at best I'd be labelled his homo buddy, but more likely they'll think I'm involved in the MJP'

'You can't just abandon him. You let him down before. Why do you care what they think?'

'No forget it.' He turned away from her and gathered his files.

'I want you to go.' she said to his back.

'No.'

'Don't be a coward!'

'No. And that's the end of it.'

She sprang in front of him, her mouth became round like an O as she opened and shut her lips, spitting out words that bit him:

'Ahh look at you! Bloody yellow belly! Hong Kong Foey with his dreaded Hong Kong Foey chop.'

She pointed at him and jeered:

'You couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag. You're scared of your own shadow. Chinky Chinky Charlie sitting on a rail, along comes a white man and cuts off his tail! What about this?'

Her face was pink and flushed and she sang at him:

'Ching Chong Chinaman went to milk a cow but didn't know how. Ching Chong Chinaman pulled the wrong tit and got covered in shit!'

Her arms cut the air with kung fu moves, faster and faster.

'Or this one?' she shouted, 'This ones for you! Chin Chin Chinaman bought a little shop, he we'd in a bottle and called it Pop!'

He felt his heart tremor and crack and she was screaming:

'Watch this!' She pulled the corners of her eyelids up and yelled 'Chinese!' then she pulled them down and yelled 'Japanese!' she leaned forward and touched her knees with her fingertips and shrieked 'Dirty Knees!' then she stood up straight and looked him in the eye, she lifted up

her blouse showing him her breasts and hollered ‘What are these?’

He slapped her hard round her face and remembered the hotel room in Hong Kong.

Jin Yu locked the bedroom door and threw himself on the bed. He laid there in the gloom, the sunlight slid weakly through the window shutters creating long beams of misty white dust. He shut his eyes. He knew he’d forgive Mandy, knew she’d win in the end and he’d have to visit Hoi Fat. Yet there was no way he could go without getting entangled in the wreckage and Han Yu would not forgive him. His thoughts whirred around in his head blurring into one another until he fell asleep.

He dreamed he was sitting in a restaurant garden, the sun was shining and everything was a lush green. He was sat at a round table next to Hoi Fat who was dressed in a yellow silk tunic, smiling like the Yellow Emperor. He introduced Jin Yu to a large voluptuous women with long black hair tied in a plat.

‘Madame Wang,’ she simpered and bowed.

On the table was a round chocolate cake decorated with sugared flowers and fruits. Hoi Fat and Madame Wang complimented Jin Yu as they admired the glaze cherries and snow-white blossoms crafted in royal icing. He felt proud but humble at the same time and began to give excuses for having baked such a small cake.

He said, ‘I’m no cook really.’

Then he woke up.

He could hear Mandy knocking and saw the door handle turn. He got up and unlocked the door then sat back down on the edge of the bed.

‘Sorry, forgive me and have another gin and tonic.’ she whispered.

Jin Yu watched as she balanced a silver tray with two glasses filled with ice, a bottle of dry gin and a jug of tonic water. She placed the tray on the bedside table. He didn’t look at her, he just grabbed the bottle of gin and took a good long slug. His throat was on fire, his eyes watered and he drank more.

‘Hey that’s not fair!’ she laughed.

She took the gin bottle from him and poured a glassful, added a dash of tonic and drank it all, tipping the glass up and sucking the gin through the ice cubes as they fell over her lips. She smiled. Her mouth was red and swollen by the ice.

He grabbed the bottle back off her, took a deep breath and put it to his mouth and poured a flood of gin straight down to his guts and in that moment light bulbs popped and flashed in front of his eyes. The room filled with a warm golden glow and he saw she’d become incredibly sweet like candy floss, innocent like soft pink clouds sending forth a sticky heady aroma of flowers. She giggled and wobbled towards him then threw herself over his lap, her bottom up in the air.

‘Oh I’ve been so bad and rude. What are you going to do about it?’

‘I’ll teach you.’ his words came thick and slushy.

He slapped her backside while she laughed and squirmed as his hand

burnt spanking her. Somehow she wriggled free and was down on the hard shiny wooden floor between his legs, and his cock was in her mouth. He held her hair in his fists and she sucked on him like a kid with a lolly and she ran her fingernails over his balls and swished her tongue like a cat licking butter cream.

Later laying across the bed watching her snore he realised he was still drunk. He grumbled with his drunken self.

'Look at you! Drunk as a coot, as a lout, as a newt, as a skunk, as a judge.'

'Hell, that's not fair. It's Hoi Fat's fault again.'

'How? He's not even here, he's in the clink.'

'I know, and if I were the judge I'd let my monkey friend go free.'

'They'd never give you the case, look at you pissed!'

'What? I'm at my best right now. Hold on, lets drink the gin down to the last drop.'

'No, you've had enough.'

'Why not? Cut the bullshit. They want us flayed, guilty or innocent. Who gives a crap? Because we are guilty, just like dirt, and let there be bits of skin from all the drinkers, all the bloody sinners, all down the drain. No hold it! Sorry Judge I've changed my mind. These are dangerous times brother. We have to fight the good fight. Let not our souls shrivel from want of alcohol.'

'You're just a fat sentimental git!'

'Shush! As I was saying, we're in the shit and a man lies in prison.'

'So what? He's hardly the only one.'

'Shush I told you. Liquor cleanses the soul and brings new light and a feeling of comfort like God is finally with us and we're his little children.'

'God doesn't give a damn.'

'He'll feed us with biscuits and chocolate cake, and give us a mighty brew of such staggering potency that after the first scorching sip even unflagging drinkers will fall down bang on the floor as happy as hell.'

'And you're just a drunken slob.'

'So? When we're drunken slobes we feel all warm and fuzzy inside as if cuddled by angels. We smile and our faces become red and shining like God's own little red plums. We love our brothers and the bible makes sense when you're drunk.'

Jin Yu looked about waiting to be heckled, but only Mandy's snoring interrupted his flow. He told himself, 'You can forgive a goddamn Jezebel of a whore, like this one laying here in your bed. God will forgive her and you'll forgive her and God will forgive bloody Hoi Fat too.'

Then Jin Yu sat up and shook his head like a wet dog. Maybe he was still drunk but he felt sober. He knew he had to find Father Cornelius Wong Kok right away; the priest could be the answer to his prayers.

He left Mandy sleeping on the bed and went to take a cold shower.

A couple of hours later he found himself standing alone in the musty corridor of an old building in George town. Wondering if he were still

pissed he steadied himself, and slowly read a dull brass plaque nailed to a door painted in flaky brown paint.

*“Prison ministry Penang”*

He knocked and waited. He could hear someone shuffling towards him. The power with which the old priest flung open the door made him jump out of his skin. He hadn't seen Father Cornelius since he was a child.

He still towered over Jin Yu like an old weathered oak tree. His arms like thick branches had swung through the air, clubbing Jin Yu round the ear when he'd whispered, squashed into the pew every Sunday along with his brother and cousins as they'd squirmed impatiently waiting to get back to the beach house, back to their games, back to freedom.

They stood facing each other. Father Cornelius gave off a mixture of odours: smoke and stale sweat and something sickly like mint toffee and old coffee. His dark brown tunic was stained and shiny, made so by the nuns who wielded burning hot irons over his garments until the seams shone like slime trails and the cuffs smeared with gleaming nose snot. He turned and staggered, feeling his way back to his desk, wavering like a ship's mast out on the high seas.

They sat down.

'Do you remember me?' Jin Yu asked him.

Father Cornelius gave him a dirty look.

'Maybe my lad, but that's neither here nor there. What's to remember?'

'Phang family? Sunday School? There were five of us.' Jin Yu urged him to remember.

'Badly behaved bunch of rascals! What do you want?'

Jin Yu told him, 'I'm considering making a donation, a substantial donation.'

He gawked at Jin Yu as though he'd just said something ridiculous. 'You want to donate to our prison ministry?'

The old priest's eyes glimmered fiery from behind their thick milky cataracts, Jin Yu reddened.

'Yes.' he cleared his throat, 'I'd like to know more of course. See for myself, first hand.'

The priest stiffened in his seat. Staring beyond Jin Yu, he boomed his sermon to the lime washed walls.

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul,' he spat, 'and love thy neighbour as you love yourself! No matter what shape he comes in. No matter how difficult. No matter what his faults are. No matter what his crimes are.' He glared at Jin Yu, raising his bushy eyebrows, waiting for the go-ahead.

Hearing the preacher in Father Cornelius, Jin Yu agreed with him, 'I see. Well that sounds very Christian.'

'Remember the shepherd is concerned for all his sheep.' Father Cornelius took a deep breath, his voice rising higher, 'Most especially the lost ones and the blackest ones of all.'

'Of course he is,' Jin Yu soothed, 'and I hear you hold church services in Penang jail'



The priest leaned forward, his yellowed fingertip pointing at Jin Yu.

'We choose to believe in the prisoner's innate goodness. We hope by bringing the peace of God's love to their troubled souls, we may be able to convert their hearts and bring about true repentance.'

Jin Yu revealed his chequebook and pen, almost waving them with a flourish under the priest's dripping nose.

'First, I would like to attend one of these services, though not as an official visitor. Would that be possible?'

Father Cornelius watched the pen suspended above the white cheque.

'Well it could be arranged, perhaps as the lay Chaplain's assistant or usher. Have you received the Holy Communion?'

'I have.' Jin Yu told him, slowly writing the cheque, adding one zero at a time. 'So when will the next prison service be?'

'This Sunday, call on Brother Fok on your way out. He's on the ground floor, lay chaplain office. You may leave your generous donation with me.'

When he got home that evening she seemed to have forgotten all about Hoi Fat, and Jin Yu decided to say nothing more. The following morning he woke Mandy and told her he was going to church without saying where. He knew she wouldn't want to come. She looked at him as though he were mad, made a wry face and rolled over in the bed and went back to sleep.

Later that morning, at the prison refectory Jin Yu stood sweating in his suit. He'd been ordered to arrange the chairs in rows like pews and place a prayer book on each seat. He kept an eye on Brother Fok, afraid of being left alone. The priest had pushed three tables together and covered them with a purple cloth, he was busy with setting up a makeshift altar and ignored him. Jin Yu sighed, he mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and began the job of piling food baskets onto a table opposite the door. Lastly he built a crooked display in the shape of a crucifix with "Jesus Loves You" and "God Is Love" booklets. Brother Fok had warned him to take up his position before the prisoners arrived and guard the handout table to make sure no one took two baskets.

Finished and with nothing else to do he wandered over to Brother Fok and asked him, 'Do all the Catholics attend your service?'

Brother Fok shook his head smiling, 'Mostly those who have no money and no family, they come for the food baskets.'

Jin Yu began to wonder if Hoi Fat would turn up, it hadn't crossed his mind before that he might not bother.

'Well I guess the men will be here soon!'

Brother Fok laughed, 'Men! No men. I hold the women's prison service.'

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Hoy fat would have said.

Jin Yu wished he'd never come to this wretched place, he watched as the women were herded like cows into the hall forming a barricade between him and the doorway. He stood stranded, barely listening. He was desperate to leave.

Brother Fok spoke his sermon in a bleak voice, shouting words here

and there that reverberated around the hall.

‘Wives, SUBMIT to your husbands as to the Lord. For the HUSBAND is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the CHURCH.’ He went on and on for what seemed like hours.

‘Husbands should love their WIVES,’ Fok yelled, ‘just as Christ loved the church, and gave HIMSELF up for her to make her holy, CLEANSING her by the WASHING of water through the word, and to present her without stain or WRINKLE or any other BLEMISH.’

Jin Yu sat in a bored stupor then at last the women stampeded across the hall clamouring for their food baskets. Afterwards, he hurriedly stacked up the chairs and collected the unwanted booklets and prayer books.

He sped over to Brother Fok and announced, ‘They’ve all gone with one food basket each. I’ve packed everything. Are we ready to leave?’

Jin Yu had Brother Fok’s suitcase in his hand.

Fok shook his head, ‘Wait! One more sinner, one more!’

Jin Yu’s heart sank as he and Brother Fok followed a guard through a corridor that stank of piss and disinfectant.

‘This woman is a hardened sinner.’ Fok confided, ‘She is possessed by the worst demons. If you are embarrassed by nudity I warn you before we enter to avert your eyes.’

They stopped behind the guard and waited while he looked through the bars of a cell door. He turned round grimacing and told them in a whisper, ‘I think maybe sleeping, maybe not. Remember don’t cross red line, chain four feet long.’

He opened the door with his key and stood back. Jin Yu followed Brother Fok inside the cell. He kept his head down and peeped from the corner of his eye. She was lying on a mattress. She had a thick wiry moustache and a long straggly beard. His mouth hung open in shock.

Brother Fok whispered, ‘The doctors here give her male hormones to try and cure her, but it doesn’t work. She is possessed by the Devil’s vile lust. We have tried exorcism to no avail, let us pray.’

Jin Yu was too horrified to look at her, so he clasped his hands and stared at his feet. He could hear Brother Fok praying under his breath and then he heard the chains slowly jangling and scraping across the cement floor as she struggled to her feet. The same clinking sound of chains he’d heard years before in a courtyard full of banana trees. He took two more steps back from the red line; nearly at the door he was ready to run. He wondered how this could have happened.

‘I remember you! Blardibasket!’ she shouted.

And Jin Yu for one second caught her eye before he ducked his head and shot out through the door.

The guard was still there leaning against the wall, he grinned at Jin Yu making him feel relieved like it was just another normal day.

Making him want to say, ‘Yeah I know. What a crazy bitch! And I’m just a philanthropic millionaire, checking out the ministry before I donate.’

But he said nothing and he waited for Brother Fok to join him before

blurting out, 'I've never seen her before in my life!'

Fok patted his shoulder. 'Don't worry she says that to everyone.'

'What'll happen to her?'

'Can't say. Would a hospital be better or worse? Drug her or lobotomise her? What are the alternatives? She's a broken machine, we can only pray for her soul.'

\*

They were on a flight back to Kuala Lumpur and Mandy had fallen asleep. She had her arms around a fat cuddly dragon. Jin Yu had bought it for her in a street market the first night they'd arrived in Hong Kong.

She had taken it with her to the British consular office, where she'd stood with her arm around the dragon perched on her hip, and her hand on the bible. She'd sworn in front of the Vice Consular that her passport photo was a true likeness and yes she was a spinster. She'd asked Jin Yu to hold the dragon while she filled in the forms, and then they were told to return in six weeks.

'You need a baby,' he told her, smiling as she sat the dragon on her lap.

'Let's make a baby Mandy,' he said as she stroked the dragon's belly.

It was made of shiny green satin with pointy silver wings and two large fangs hung from its smiling mouth, its horns were crooked and lop sided and its legs lumpy and short.

Mandy loved the dragon.

'I know he's a stupid fat toy and I look ridiculous, but I don't give a damn. I adore him and I don't know why and I don't care. It's not for me to be pragmatic and I'm not squashing him in a suitcase, it'll hurt his feelings. If you're too embarrassed to be seen at the airport with us, I'll get a separate flight!'

And Jin Yu wondered if Mandy would be his child or wife or both.

'Shall we have a baby Mandy?' He asked again, watching her smile sweetly as she poked the dragon's fangs.

'OK,' she said, 'After we're married.'

*She dreams of him that night. He's standing in the wind, his big crazy hair dancing like black flames around his head. He smiles at her but the smile is broken, it's cracked and sad. He tries to smile harder as the wind blows him backwards. She reaches out pulling him towards her and sees his eyes warm and glowing like chestnuts and she feels glad as she holds on to him.*

Back in Ipoh Jin Yu found a letter waiting for him. There was no sender's address.

Dear Butterball,

*I knew you wouldn't come, you're a fat deserter but you're the only*

friend I've got. I guess I don't deserve anyone better than a chicken-hearted malingerer, so I'll have to make the best out of you.

You must get me out. You'll say you can't, and I say you can.

I have a suitcase full of money in a noodle shop in Kedah. There's a row of shop houses between the kotta kular fort and the fishing boat jetties. Look for Lu Thiam Cafe. Use the toilet if you must but don't waste your time eating there, just ask for Fat Auntie and tell her to hand over my case.

Go and see that Dixon bloke first (you know who I mean) and make a deal, hurry before they transfer me to KL.

Don't chuck this and try to forget me or I'll haunt you.

*Your obedient and slender servant.*

At first Jin Yu thought he'd throw the letter, he didn't believe in ghosts. Yet somehow deep inside he felt as though he'd been set a task by Mandy. She'd become his jade maiden of noble birth and arrogance with a wily stubborn passion for his outcast friend. And Hoi Fat had become a ruined emperor overcome by the cunning eunuchs. He knew he would never be her hero if he did nothing. Heroes were sent on quests and ever since childhood he'd been waiting without knowing it, and now was the time. But this was no dashing adventure; there would be no kung fu, only squalor, bribery and lies.

The following day he was in Kuala Lumpur on business and late in the afternoon he found himself sitting in a crowded office lobby waiting for Mr Dixon to receive him. He'd been there nearly an hour and was fed up. He stood up and asked Dixon's secretary how much longer he'd have to wait.

The secretary announced loudly:

'Sorry my Boss is beraking on toilet, he must pass motion. So can take message?'

Jin Yu sighed:

'No message, I'll keep waiting.'

He sat back down and another half hour passed before Dixon's secretary approached him.

He told Jin Yu:

'Mr Dixon see you now, follow me.'

They went through a door at the back of the lobby.

The secretary stopped in his tracks, slapped his head and moaned:

'Aiyo! The lift is broken already, we use the stairs one.'

By the time they reached the top floor Jin Yu was breathless.

'Down there.' The secretary told him, pointing to a frosted glass door at the end of the corridor, and then he headed back down the stairs leaving Jin Yu alone.

Dixon Luis Xavier Thanaletchumy reminded Jin Yu of an elf on a

toadstool. His silvery hair, wispy like a halo framed his shrivelled head. His feet hardly touched the ground. He sat in his chair, legs crossed while swinging a foot. His nose was beaky, his hawk eyes watchful, and his tiny wrists were adorned by a massive watch and a clumpy gold bracelet.

Dixon glared at Jin Yu and asked:

‘Who you?’

Jin Yu told him:

‘I’m here on behalf of Chung Hoi Fat.’

‘Are you friend?’

‘I’m a friend of the family.’

Dixon narrowed his eyes, his head tilted to the side.

‘What’s your interest?’

Jin Yu cleared his throat:

‘Ahem. Well, I was led to believe that you might be able to facilitate his situation?’

Dixon slowly nodded and leaned towards Jin Yu.

‘We canna let him off the hook!’

Jin Yu took a deep breath:

‘He’s just a harmless fool, like a child, a sort of simple innocent.’

Dixon shook his head:

‘Don’t want him. We want his leader and nice confession.’

‘He can’t confess!’

‘Why not?’ spat Dixon, ‘Guilty as hell anyway! We got the mattresses and the forensic.’ He leaned back in his chair, ‘Personally I don’t care, take it up the back passage myself sometimes. You like bum action?’

Jin Yu couldn’t believe his ears, he protested:

‘Absolutely not! I’m deeply offended.’

‘No harm.’ Dixon shrugged and pointed a bony finger at him, ‘Only you all forget he take money from the till without permission, stealing from his own and then go against. Very bad I say. Very hunchback, same like a traitor, very paisai.’

‘It’s not his fault, he’s a failure.’ Jin Yu rushed on, ‘He’s practically an orphan, a man without a father. He was searching for a surrogate, someone to follow. He found his leader, an older man with a mission, a man who offered him a place in this world.’

Dixon scoffed:

‘Don’t talk cock lah yu. His leader Ramin is thief! What he do when get caught? Always same old story. He steal from own brothers, then say they put money in his pocket. But you know what I say? No smoke without fire! No stink in room without shit close by!’ He sniffed the air, ‘And this is second time charged for buggery.’

Jin Yu shook his head and argued:

‘You just said you don’t mind, you said you do it too.’

‘Of course! Why not? We are tolerant Muslim country. You keep your head down. OK? And bugger away to hearts content.’ He looked daggers at Jin Yu, ‘But when pot calls kettle black and wants to be in charge of the larder! Well my son that’s bad kettle of fish.’

'It will be the voters who decide who's in charge of the larder.' Jin Yu told him.

Dixon stared icily at Jin Yu and asked:

'His leader want win vote? He want pull wool over their eyes? I say speak up! Tell public where he dip his Johnny and then we see if he win election.'

'He's very popular with the international press,' Jin Yu boasted, 'they wont be happy about him being in jail charged with homosexual acts.'

'So what? Dixon grouched, 'It's all right for them abroad! They have gay ministers and some are lesbians. But we're here and they are there.' He slid down from his chair and stood like a tiny child behind his desk. 'Listen you! Everybody know Ramin always getting young men to suck cock. My God! How many would come forward if not piss scared of scandal. So if your dinky friend like to say he was bugged by his leader and you give cash to oil the wheels you have a deal.'

'How much?'

'Fifty thousand Ringgit plus confession leader raped him.'

Jin Yu was a busy man. He was cramming all his business into the few weeks left before he and Mandy got married. Amir had booked their trip to Easter Island.

He spent days away from Ipoh leaving Mandy there alone. He worried about her and he also worried that Hoi Fat would haunt him in the end. He hadn't done anything more to help him after seeing Mr Dixon and Mandy seemed to have forgotten all about it.

He began taking her to the beach house whenever he could. He saw she was happier there and he tried not to mind that she drank bottles of gin and chain smoked for hours while staring out to sea; her eyes squinting against the harsh light as though trying to see a lost ship or something she was waiting for. It was out there on the horizon, it would be coming in on the tide, something expected and only she knew what. Sometimes she held a newspaper in her hands as a prop to hide her absence while she peered into the distance.

One morning while they were sitting on the veranda, she told him:

'I want a trained monkey to throw confetti at the wedding, and I want to have my fortune told by Gung Hok the famous astrologist in George Town.'

He told her:

'I'll take you later this afternoon. Why don't you have a look at your horoscope in the newspaper, and mine too?'

He felt hopeful and settled down to listen to her read his future.

She smoothed the newspaper in her lap.

'Me first!' she said. 'An uneasy day when you might fret, you may even experience some unknown anxiety which plays around on your mind. It is better you reschedule your appointments for some other time.'

She narrowed her eyes weighing up the truth in the prediction.

'Now it's my turn.' he said.

She told him:

'By and large a passive day with chances of some news from a foreign source. You will probably feel slightly distressed throughout the day.' She looked up, 'Rubbish! If you have a passive day why would you feel distressed?'

He didn't know or care; instead he watched her flick through the newspaper, waiting for her to read out loud all that was atrocious and outrageous.

'You remember the woman sentenced to caning for drinking beer? Well she's off the hook. Listen! Aysha Bint Suleiman's family was informed by letter that the sultan of Johor state has overturned the ruling.'

'That's good news,' he smiled.

'The caning sentence will be substituted with a three-week community service at a local orphanage. Ms Aysha Bint's father told the UFP news agency, "Aysha was expecting a caning. She would rather be caned than do three weeks voluntary work, as she will now miss her holiday to America and the airline won't refund the ticket, but we respect the sultan's decision." She looked at Jin Yu, her head tilted to one side, 'Would you rather be caned or lose your holiday to Easter Island?'

'Lose the holiday,' he told her, 'and what would you choose?'

'I'd rather be caned.'

He swallowed hard, his heart beating, his blood rushing to his balls.

*She sits in a chair, naked but for her long white socks, her legs are open with her feet on the armrests. His hand trembles as he rinses the razor in a bowl of steaming water and the tufts of silky hair float like brambles on the surface. His cock so hard, sweat like rain on his brow, his breath jagged, he touches her lips with his finger tip, soft velvet skin white and smooth and a rose flower bud, he lowers his head between her legs and kisses those lips.*

After she told him:

'I don't want to leave. Let's stay at the beach house and you can drive to Ipoh when you want. It'll only take you a couple of hours.'

Jin Yu bought her a box full of old bone and bamboo Mah-jong tiles; it was a Chinese set and the seasons were depicted by the fisherman, woodcutter, farmer and scholar. The leather box was decorated in gold leaf embossed on dark red leather. Inside a woman and man were etched in gold, they lay upon a red and gold flowered carpet, surrounded by golden furniture. The woman's head rested on a round gold cushion and her hair was tied in tight buns like plums, and the man was kneeling between her legs. He was touching her left breast and his penis was poised above her open vagina and she wore a bangle on her wrist. There was a screen in the background with a flowered robe hanging from it and a low table with a vase of golden peonies.

Mandy bought a book on Mah-jong divination and would read their future on the bed at night when all he wanted to do was sleep. The sound

of rattling bone and bamboo kept him awake. Sometimes she would let him choose the tiles and then she'd consult her book.

'Two of Bamboo symbolises the Duck, Ya. Two means a pair of ducks remain together for life, an enduring partnership. Are we two ducks?' She asked him, smiling sweetly.

Other times he found her playing Mah-jong with the laundry man and the gardener. He never told her he didn't approve, because he knew it would create a row and he thought he might be jealous.

Since Mandy had refused to leave the beach house, Jin Yu found himself travelling for hours each day between the island and his office in Ipoh, or flying from Penang airport to Singapore and back again at night. Mandy began spending her time at the Eastern Oriental Café, a seedy hotel full of back packers and old European junkies. Jin Yu wanted to know what she was playing at and she was vague, answering him through a cloud of smoke, her eyes half shut as though trying to remember some long distant memory.

One Friday he returned early afternoon. Osman came to collect him from the airport and asked:

'You want to go straight to house?'

Jin Yu sighed:

'Where is she?'

'George Town, Eastern Oriental café.'

'Did she tell you what time to fetch her?'

'No, she say she get taxi back to house.'

As they drove through the traffic away from the airport, Jin Yu cross-examined Osman:

'Do you take her there every day?'

'Yes.'

'What time does she usually come back home?'

'Night time.' Osman's neck reddened and he blurted, 'Sorry but perhaps not good thing!'

'Why not?'

'She lose much money every day.'

'What! How so?'

'Easy,' Osman spat, 'she play Mah-jong. She always lose to hotel cook Chu Wang. He is best player.'

Jin Yu was maddened.

'What on earth is she doing playing with a Chinese cook?'

'All the tourists at the cafe play with Chu Wang and they all losing. Everybody know he is best, everybody like him.'

'Why would she play against him?'

'Ahh, she believe she is good player. She tell me she have unlucky star soon changing.'

'She can't play, she's too slow. You know she can't.'

'I know, but she think she can. Wong Chee and Foo Wan always let her win.'

'Why?'



'She very happy when winning, they don't mind to lose some cents.'

'Drive there now.'

He found her there in the back room of the old hotel that stank of Peking duck and beer.

*I'll get all the cash and bring it home to you.*

*You're as crazy as a bat and thin as a dime.*

*Skinny junkies slip by, call girls for sale, and a spittoon full of sin.*

*The Chinese men make bets on her, and her perfume wont let them be.*

*I could stay here all night.*

*And the click clack tapping of the tiles, and he's looking for someone to blame, and he's looking at her.*

*We've only just begun.*

*He knocks the bottle on floor.*

*Now the gins all gone, you'll kill me with your rusty laugh. Just look at me.*

*Just give me a couple more games.*

*Her smile is made from honey, slow and sweet, and she's rubbing her back against the chair like an alley cat.*

*He shakes his head.*

*Never trust a Chinese cook.*

*And then the cook said crazy things, he said she'd cut two holes in the back of her dress and she had grown feathered angel wings.*

*The air was thick with catcalls and a sour mean stench and he was stuck there like dog tied to a post.*

*I spend all your money and I don't say my prayers, I live on dreams and liquor.*

*She's wearing his favourite dress.*

*I would beat you but I know you'll never change, they say I'll buy you anything and believe all your lies.*

*I know you can't trust me and I never behave and ruin everything.*

*I'm sorry I break your heart, take me home.*

*She said her farewells to them all.*

She was lying in the bed. He sat on the end watching her stubborn lips curl into a grin as she asked him:

'What's the big deal?'

He knew he could be stubborn too and he told her:

'I don't want you playing with a man like that.'

'No one else to play with. I need practice and the others cheat. They always let me win.'

'You're losing a lot of money to him every day.'

'A lot of money for a Chinese cook in a crap café, but so far I've hardly lost the cost of one of my shoes.'

'Please don't go back there again.'

She looked at him her face carved in stone. She didn't answer.

'Why don't you spend time with my friend's wives?'  
'I hate them. They're dead boring.'  
She tipped her head on one side like a baby bird and he knew she would always win. She asked him:  
'Will you play Mah-jong with me?'  
'No.'  
'Why not?'  
'I haven't played for years, not since Hoi Fat.'  
He'd almost forgotten Hoi Fat.  
'So what?' she huffed, 'This is now, and I want you to play with me. Don't use Hoi Fat as an excuse. I bet you didn't even go and see him.'  
He felt in the wrong and mumbled:  
'I tried. First I went to the church prison service but it was only for women. Then he wrote me a letter, asked me to meet someone who can get him out of jail. I went there too, and the man wants fifty thousand Ringgit. Hoi Fat says he has a suitcase full of cash in a noodle shop in Kedah, he told me to go and get it.'  
'And did you?'  
'No, I've had enough. I want to stay out of it.'  
'Lets go and get it.'  
'What?'  
'Please, please, please. I really want to, let's go together. Don't say no. Don't say we cant, lets be Bonnie and Clyde.'

*He looks at her, she's Bonnie already, sprawled on the bed in a lace petticoat, one tit bare, a smoking pistol under the pillow, a cigar in her mouth, she smells of gun powder and her heart's like a firecracker shooting shards of light that rip the night sky, he can hear the explosions and wonders if he'll ever be Clyde.*

\*

He took the Range Rover and left Osman behind. They travelled along the North highway from Butterworth to Sungai Petani. Mandy wanted to drive through the Lembah Bujang valley and see the Hindu Buddhist kingdom ruins. She got out the jeep and sat on the steps of an ancient chandi, smoked a cigarette and told him to take a photograph of her.

After they took the coast road from Merbok, sometimes she thought she caught a glimpse of the shining blue sea. She followed the roadmap resting her finger on the Straits of Malacca.

They drove through miles of unending paddy and the road was like a ribbon, rice fields were lush green tipped with gold, others were scorched yellow, there were fields of brown stubble and shorn stalks.

Men and women in flapping straw hats that hid their faces, bent low in the paddy fields chopping down the rice stalks and tying them in bushels.

They passed burning fields and black smoking fields and with her feet up on the dashboard she looked across the plains over the acres of paddy,

and she could see Gunung Jerai, a massive limestone mountain, its peak hidden in thick grey cloud.

They drove further north to Yan and Mandy said she was tired and wanted to stop by the sea. So they pulled in at a small fishing village called Kuala Sedaka, with tiny wooden fishing boats moored in mud and low water at the river mouth.

There was a small noodle stall with tables and chairs out on the dirt road offering Laksam rice noodles in sour fish gravy. They stood at the counter watching an old man in a white skullcap chopping cucumber and onions while fishermen sat around under shady trees mending their nets.

The breeze blew her thin skirt against her thighs and Jin Yu took her to sit down.

The old man stirred the pot, pouring in coconut milk, a spoonful of chilli paste and sprinkling coriander leaves into the billowing steam. The gravy was thick, the noodles flat and huge and they ate with chopsticks.

They drove through fields as yellow as her hair. The heavy kernels bending in the wind, lying drunken and sleeping, golden brown kernels so heavy they snapped the tall thin stalks.

A girl stood on the roadside watching them drive by, her crinkled brow, her cherry red lips, hands holding a scythe over her shoulder, as they drove on she turned and walked away through the paddy field.

He watched as she pulled the ribbon from her ponytail and her hair spilled down her neck like honey, she tossed burning butts and peanut shells from the window till they reached Kuala kedah.

They crossed the Tok Pasai Bridge, left the jeep and wandered around the ancient Kedah fort. They stood with their arms about each other in the shade of a dull grey tower, the sky was deep blue and they saw white clouds and coconut palms low on the horizon.

The river inlet was coffee brown, she stopped and took photos of the red and blue boats moored along the shore, and the men unloading fishing nets on wooden jetties and of torn coloured flags whipped in the breeze.

They went down a narrow back row of shop houses near the port and into the noodle shop.

They sat at a rough-hewn table painted bright blue while flies crawled over the crumbs and sticky stains. Someone turned the fan on and Mandy's hair blew round her face.

'I'm hungry.'

'Hoi Fat said not to eat here, just get the suitcase and go.'

'Please?' She saw he was determined, 'At least a cup of tea?'

He asked for Fat Auntie and ordered tea for two from a skinny boy in a striped sarong. The boy brought two overflowing mugs and slopped them down on the table.

He glared at Jin Yu, 'She say, what you want?'

'I'm a friend of Hoi Fat's.' Jin Yu told him.

The boy stared at Mandy then left them to drink their tea. Mandy lit a cigarette and flicked the ash on the floor.

'Sorry, there aren't any ashtrays.' She smiled, 'Do you think she minds

being called Fat? Is it because she's fat or is her name related?'

The sarong boy came back to their table. He jerked his head at them and whispered, 'Come.'

They followed him out the back of the shop and up an external staircase and into Fat Auntie's sitting room. The suitcase was there on the dining table, locks busted, open and empty.

Fat Auntie stood by the window looking shiftily, she told Jin Yu, 'I use money to send my niece, Hoi Fat cousin to Singapore, she have dicky heart, need pacer.' She looked at Mandy for help, 'Or let me see, I use money to pay off bad debt, money lender threaten to burn down shop house.' She shrugged and threw her hands up, 'Or I lose money gambling. What I say?'

'The truth.' Jin Yu demanded.

'Can't tell truth.'

They stood staring at each other over the table. Fat Auntie's hair was thinning, cut short like a schoolboy's and Jin Yu could see her scalp shining through. She had a soft round face and monkey eyes like Hoi Fat.

Jin Yu persisted, 'Hoi Fat needs this money. He has to buy his way out of trouble.'

'I know, we read paper, but money gone.' her mouth hung slackly and her eyes had become sad and dull.

'Where?'

'Cant say.'

Jin Yu scowled, 'Just like Hoi Fat, you won't give a straight answer.'

Fat Auntie's lip trembled then she flashed a smile of motley broken teeth, 'My son take all money. He gone, suitcase empty, son gone. I am old woman; you tell Hoi Fat I spend money, now no money.'

Later he and Mandy stood at the harbour quayside. The sun was setting.

'What will we do now?' Her face was pale in the red sunlight.

He reached out and stroked her shining hair; it felt so soft. 'Don't worry I'll pay for him.' he told her.

'How are we going to get back to Penang? Shall we stay here tonight and leave tomorrow?'

He would sort out everything, 'There's a car ferryboat to Lang Kawi Island, we can sleep there and go back to George Town in the morning.'

The sea was mercury, dense, silvery like a mirror. The sky a dark dull grey lustre like old lead. She stood at the rail waiting for the first glimpse of land; he stood with his arms around her.

\*

Jin Yu went with Percival Pereira, lawyer and old school boy, to visit Hoi Fat. They waited for hours in a whitewashed room with a small barred window. In the end Hoi Fat came in with a guard and sat down at the table. Jin Yu was stunned. Hoi Fat looked lousy, as skinny as a beanpole, his head

bent low and his greasy hair hung in his eyes. He reminded Jin Yu of Chan Hoi the foreman at Batu Gajah.

He cocked his head high and grinned, two front teeth were missing and his fat lips were split. He joked:

'So it's you! And Percy you old dog! I'm a condemned man. Come to gloat?'

His wings were broken, his tail had been chopped off and his agate eyes were cracked. Hsigo hero no more, just a lanky yellow skinned Chinese man.

Jin Yu told him:

'I met Fat Auntie everything went well.'

Hoi Fat snorted:

'Liar, I got a postcard from my delinquent cousin. He apologises, but doesn't believe my savings are of any use to me where I am. So he thanks me for his new life in Sydney, no plans to return.'

Jin Yu smiled weakly:

'I'll take care of expenses.'

'For god's sake why didn't you say so? Fat slammed his hand down on the table, 'Why are you wasting time here? Get on with it. I'm cracking up fast.'

Jin Yu looked away and Percy said:

'We need a confession.'

'Cant. Are you imbeciles? Just sort out the cash.'

'It's not enough without a confession.'

'What?' Fat lowered his voice and lent across the table, 'If I'm paying to be let off the hook, what's to confess?'

Percy whispered:

'Confess Ramin raped you.'

Hoi Fat started laughing, forced like a lousy actor, like a machine gun, like a braying donkey, like a madman locked in a dungeon.

'No.'

'If you don't there's no deal.'

Hoi Fat said nothing, just stared at his long bony hands, while deep wrinkles grew over his face that was once as smooth as a baby's arse.

'We have the confession drafted all you need to do is sign.' Percy cajoled, 'One quick signature, over and done with.'

Hoi Fat looked past them, like he eyes were blinded by something no one else could see. Then he dropped his gaze.

'Just ignore me, I need to do this before I write my name.' he muttered.

He started slapping his own face as the light went out in his eyes. Stinging slaps that knocked his head left and right. His hands like slices of raw meat, his voice raw:

'You're a lousy bastard, a rotten traitor, an arsehole.'

Whack.

'You disgust me, you grovelling coward, you dog, you're not fit to lick his boots.'

Whack.

'You promised you'd never betray him as long as you lived.

Whack.

'You say you don't want to do but you'll do it in the end.'

Then at last he stopped. He sagged in his chair, his eyes smarted while tears ran down his cheeks and he held out his beaten hand for the pen.

A week later Jin Yu went back to Penang jail at night. An Indian janitor was waiting for him in the darkness by a side door and hurriedly led him up a back staircase and into an empty office.

He turned and told Jin Yu:

'Warden coming soon.'

Then he left and Jin Yu found himself alone waiting between the desk and the door. He wondered if he should sit down, the room was hot and he trod softly over to the window and wished there were a breeze. At last a beefy man stuffed inside a tight shiny suit came through the door.

He told Jin Yu:

'I'm not the Warden. You don't know me, never seen me before, and will never see me again. I'm liaison, get my meaning?'

His dark eyes watched Jin Yu sweating under the neon light.

'I have the money.' Jin Yu spoke in a whisper, and offered the man a thick envelope.

He didn't take it, instead he sat down at the warden's desk and lit a cigarette.

'No rush. You have the confession?'

Jin Yu fumbled and extracted a thinner envelope from inside his jacket. The man took it from him, spread it out flat on the table and put on his reading glasses. He read slowly.

'Good! Pass me payment.' he ordered, holding out his hand.

He counted the bank notes, and after shoved the money inside a draw. He turned the key and put it in his pocket.

'I can see in your eyes, you think I've descended to the level of a beggar for a few measly dollars.' His eyes like flint stones made Jin Yu feel faint.

'Of course not.'

'Yes. You think I'm a bad man.' he bellowed, 'But in truth I'm your personal Jesus. I listen to your prayers and make them come true. I deliver every time!'

'Yes, of course I'm very grateful.'

He stood up and laid a thick hairy hand on Jin Yu's shoulder.

'I carry heavy burdens. I deal with broken souls.' He smiled in Jin Yu's face revealing a set of tiny milk teeth, as innocent as a baby. 'Right now I have a sad case, far worse than your friend.' He sucked in his breath, 'You read about the English boy, only nineteen, surfboard full of heroin? Parents and Embassy all pulling strings, bloody useless!'

'Yes, I read something in the newspapers.'

He hee-hawed like a mad horse and stabbed Jin Yu in the chest.

'This boy, I say to him, "I'm someone to hear your prayers, you need to confess, you are not alone." But he's not a believer.' He glared at Jin Yu, 'I

could sort it,' he told him.

'Yes, I'm sure you could.'

He spat in disgust:

'Why don't they come to me? We could have him certified dead and buried, due to the heat and broken refrigeration system before the telegram hits the Prime Ministers desk. But they don't know the ways. With enough cash the Thais will supply a white man's corpse. Have you any idea how many hippies go missing in Bangkok?'

'No, I haven't.'

He pulled Jin Yu's arm.

'Come and see him.'

Jin Yu heard his blood throbbing in his ears.

'I'd rather not,' he mumbled.

'You should, it would cheer him. I'll accompany you to the car park, his cell is on our way.'

Jin Yu stood by the locked door while the man leant over a skinny boy lying on a mattress.

He hollered at the boy as if he were deaf:

'Come on. I've bought someone to meet you, someone to cheer you up.'

The boy rolled over and stared at Jin Yu.

He asked:

'Am I gonna get out?'

The man laughed softly at him:

'Sorry son. No. You're not going anywhere but to meet your maker.'

The boy's eyes were pin shot. His body oozed sweat. He clutched at the man's shirt and whined:

'Get me a pardon, please, I'll do anything your friend wants.'

The man stepped backwards chuckling. The boy slipped to the floor on his knees but wouldn't let go.

The man jeered:

'Now what is this? No hysterics! No begging! Commit a crime and pay the price. Be a man, it's all you have left at the end.'

The boy was kneeling. He clasped his hands together and lifted them in a prayer. He whispered:

'Help me. I don't wanna die.' His eyes were wild like a lassoed horse.

'Now now,' the man coaxed, 'it'll be nice and easy. First you can have your favourite dinner. Or my little friend, I'll bring you some china white, you'd like that.'

The man lifted the boy to his feet, beaming at him:

'Then we'll handcuff you and you won't see nothing. We'll put a hood over your head see? And then we'll take you to the chamber. You'll just stand nice and still, while we put the noose round your neck.'

The boy's head dropped forwards, hanging dismally. The man looked at Jin Yu over the boy's bent head, and boasted:

'We don't use no crude sailors rope. We have pucker British style nooses. Soft leather and a brass eyelet for faster pull, and a force of one

thousand pounds weight. And crack!’

He yanked an invisible rope and told the boy with sincerity:

‘We’ll adjust it proper so when you drop, your neck will twist, and snap your spinal chord fast and smooth.’

He strangled the air gently and grinned:

‘We’ll strap your legs together to stop you kicking about. We don’t want you trying to stop your fall through the trap door.’

He shuffled and tap danced on the floor trying to avoid the imaginary hole.

‘We’ll use the long drop method, calculated on the British drop tables system.’ His voice warmed, ‘I’ll be holding on to your shoulders giving you comfort.’

The man hugged the boy in his arms.

‘When I get the signal, I’ll step back and let go of you. And before you know it, crack the floor goes down.’

The boy crumpled on the floor his legs jerking. The man bent down and patted his head.

‘I know. I know you’ve got things on your chest.’ He smiled with his baby teeth, sweet-talking the boy, ‘I’m a forgiver. I’ll come tonight and bring you a nice present, something nice for your distresses.’

‘I cant wait I’m sick.’ The boy was screaming now, tears and snot ran down his face.

‘I’ll send the sweeper in with a little something. Now let go! I’ll be back later. Remember I said don’t bocor on the mattress or I’ll lempang your face.’ the man whispered.

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Jin Yu never told Mandy what had taken place that night at the prison. He just said that all had been done and now they must wait for news. Their wedding ceremony was booked, their flight was booked, and there were only two more days left to go. It was the fifteenth day of the eighth month.

She sat on the opium bed wearing a red silk cheongsam embroidered with golden peonies, her hair was tied in a bun wound with white frangipani flowers.

She asked him:

‘What am I going to do once we’re married?’

‘What ever you want.’ he told her.

‘You know what I mean. What will I do every day?’

He already knew what he hoped for:

‘I want you to be good and kind, you could help in my family’s orphanage. You can look after the little children and they will love you so much.’

‘I don’t want to do that.’ she frowned.

‘You could rescue animals?’

‘Could I? How?’

‘I have a house and land on the outskirts of Ipoh. We could convert it



into a rescue centre and home for abandoned animals.'

Her eyes lit up.

'And we'll have a baby, our own baby,' he added.

Her eyes darkened again and she said:

'I'll need a vet and some one to help me, and some one to clean up after the puppies. Do you think it'll be difficult to find them new homes?'

He didn't say nearly bloody impossible, he just wanted Mandy to be good, have his baby and marry him. He'd tell her anything she wanted to hear.

'I'll take care of everything, don't worry.' He watched her brow wrinkle and he didn't want to give her time to think. 'Tonight is the mid autumn festival. Shall I take you to the temple?' he suggested.

Later that evening they drove through the city. From the car window she saw processions of children and families snaking through the streets carrying paper fish and dragon shaped lanterns. The temple was thick with smoke. Worshipers burnt golden joss paper and incense sticks. They offered moon cakes and roasted pork, yam and watermelon seeds, red candles and prayers to Chang'e. Jin Yu gave her a golden moon cake the size of her palm, the round shape symbolising family unity.

And that night in bed he told her the story of the Jade hare and Chang'e.

"Long ago there was an immortal warrior named Houyi who lived in the Kunlun Mountains. He was a regular visitor to the emperor of heaven at the Jade Palace and each time he went there he could not help but notice a beautiful jade maiden. She was an attendant to the queen mother of the west and her name was Chang'e.

Jade maidens were not only companions of the queen mother, they were also gifted dancers and musicians and would play sublime music with their chimes, flutes and jade stones. They were the bearers of the Ling Zhi, magical mushrooms, and they presented this divine food at the banquets of the queen mother. They wore robes with long sleeves and enchanted the spirits down from the skies by whirling these sleeves in ecstatic dances. The queen mother would send them by flight to act as her messengers and impart mystical revelations to spiritual seekers.

Houyi would often watch Chang'e dancing in the Jade palace hall, spinning in her rainbow dress and feathered robe with its winged sleeves. And before long Houyi and Chang'e began to flirt like mad. She batted her eyelashes at the dining table and served him extra helpings of magic mushrooms. When she thought no one was looking she'd lift her robes high above her waist in front of him and would be naked underneath. He searched for her down long winding corridors and in the dark corners of one thousand chambers. He'd push her against the wall and press his hard cock into her.

Now Houyi had been warned against the temptation to make love to any of the jade maidens of hidden time. But it was no use and he fell deeply in love and took her to be his wife. They were married in secret under the light

of the moon.

His disregard for the palace laws and his possession of the beautiful maiden aroused jealousy in the hearts of the other immortals, and they began to slander him before the jade emperor.

‘Oh Sire! It pains me to have to tell you but Houyi has married the jade maiden Chang’e.’

The emperor laughed, ‘Why the wicked rascal, still I would have expected no less from such a fine and daring warrior.’

‘My Lord it has come to my notice that Houyi often helps himself to your golden bow and arrows.’

‘Really! And why shouldn’t my best archer make use of the finest bow in all the heavens? You’re not trying to stir up the shit are you?’

But then the day came when the emperor was in a foul mood, caused by an ongoing war with his wife.

The queen mother of the western heavens had received prayers and animal sacrifices from the villagers of Dongye, begging her to rid them of a terrible and cruel snake that killed their livestock and terrified the women and children. It was more than one hundred feet long and so thick it took a dozen men to circle it.

The queen mother decided to grant them their wish but insisted on the sacrifice of nine virgin maidens from the village, one to be sacrificed each full moon for nine full moons. At first the villagers had taken the daughters of local criminals, binding the girls and leaving them at the mouth of the snake’s cave. However after eight girls had been sacrificed they had run out of criminals who still had daughters.

Now they were forced to take a daughter from one of the good village folk. The Jade emperor was angry with the queen mother and ordered her to change the number to eight.

She refused, ‘How many times have I told you? Once you’ve cast a spell, it’s cast. No going back! No, Oh I’ve changed my mind.’

And she flung her tiger skin mantle over her shoulders and flew away in a huff.

Later that day when the Jade emperor joined the immortals in the banquet hall his heart was still dark and brooding. He sent for his whip. At first he began to whip the air sending sharp terrifying cracks through the hall. Then he whipped a serving boy across the cheek for smirking at the banquet table. Later he whipped a jade maiden’s pert bottom for wiggling in an unseemly manner. Yes, he was in an evil mood to say the least.

The immortals hung back in the shadows. The day was ripe for slander and it was not long before a jealous servant crept up to the emperor and spoke in his ear.

‘Our divine and wise emperor there is something you should know.’ he whispered, ‘Houyi has been telling jokes about you in the kitchens. I heard the words, Donkey ears. Pig’s snout. Frog’s legs. The brain of a chicken. The heart of a worm. The sexual prowess of a eunuch. Then there was much laughing and squealing Sir.’

The emperor turned a dark boiled red. Hate welled up in his chest

pumped by his heart. His lungs exhaled and his breath became a violet smoky wind that blew up in front of him, magnificent and towering high above them all. This pinnacle of beauty and ugliness, love and hatred, this raw emotion conjured in a flash now blooming like a poisonous purple wisteria that had the ability to kill other shrubs and trees by strangling them. This hate which was so beautiful to watch like drooping clusters of deep purple blooms. The seductive honeyed scent and venomous notes flooded everyone's senses, this fast growing vine of loathing, this purple dragon snaked across the floor and entangled their hearts and all were struck by its power and loveliness.

The emperor stood up from his throne and took his whip in hand and slashed at the vines. Hack and slice, slit and wound and through and through until he stood upon the crushed and fragrant blooms.

'Send for Houyi!' the emperor bellowed, and he stood waiting as the sour stench of rotting flowers wafted upwards.

The jealous servant soon returned from the kitchens and told the emperor, 'Sire, Houyi and his wife Chang'e have fled to the jade forest below on earth.'

Then the emperor sent for the vermilion bird Zhuque and ordered him to find Houyi. 'Tell him I have decreed his punishment. He is banished from heaven and will live and die upon the earth as a mere mortal and his wife too.'

Zhuque turned towards the skies and flew away like a ball of red fire.

Meanwhile Houyi and Chang'e had taken refuge in an old hunting lodge deep in the jade forest. When they heard the vermilion bird's celestial message they were devastated. Chang'e, who was usually a pretty girl with eyebrows like distant hills and a face like hibiscus flowers, instantly turned ugly. Her hair grew as matted as a bird's nest, her eyebrows knotted together like ravens wings, her face turned as red as a baboon's backside and her skin was icy to the touch.

For one hundred days Houyi tried to comfort her. He picked her up and rocked her with rhythmic lullabies and poured bottles of liquor down her throat. This had a soothing effect and she would soon fall asleep.

Luckily Houyi was also a skilled hunter and archer and in no time at all he was able to restore Chang'e to her former comfort and luxury.

He traded in beautiful furs and rare meat and soon Chang'e was wrapped in tiger skin cloaks with dainty shoes sewn from the finest silk, and she wore diamond and jade rings on each finger. Together they slowly settled into their new life in the jade forest unaware that disaster was about to strike in the heavens.

At that time Dijun the sun god and his wife Xihe had ten sons. They were known as the ten sun crows. Each crow had three legs and they lived perched on a leaning red mulberry tree at the foot of the sun mountain on the eastern seashore. The mulberry tree had many mouths opening from its branches and the crows lived inside them. Each day it was the turn of one of the sun crows to travel around the world on a carriage driven by Xihe the mother of the suns.

As soon as one sun crow returned another would set forth. The sun crows also loved to leave the heavens behind and fly to earth to feast on the immortal grasses; but Xihe didn't like them doing this, so she covered her eyes so as not to see them going.

One day, all ten of these rascally sun crows decided they were tired and bored of the same old routine. So they all came out of the mulberry tree mouths together and circled the sky over and over causing the earth to burn.

The crops shrivelled up in the fields, the golden harvest withered and the five grains were scorched to dust. The land was black and smoking. Ghouls were crying in the burnt fields. The lakes, rivers and ponds became beds of dried cracked earth, dead fish rotted and the red crowned cranes shrieked for one hundred nights. There were women who became men and men who became women and the people cowered in shelters and collapsed from the heat. The heavens rained down flesh and fiery brambles.

The Emperor called for Dijun the sun god.

'Your wicked sons, the three legged crows are killing the earth!' he hollered, 'What has got into them?'

Dijun shook his head in shame, 'They are wily delinquents, mother too soft on them, she always looks the other way.'

The emperor wagged his long jade nail guards in front of Dijun's nose, 'That's all very well, mother love and all that! But you as their father and god of the sun, you'd better put a stop to it now.'

Dijun shrugged, 'How? They fly too fast to be caught. They've nicked their mother's carriage and there's no way to stop them. I've already tried. I sent the nine headed bird Jiufeng after them; everyone uses him to scare their children, but my sons just laughed at him.'

'Now listen!' declared the emperor, 'I won't have all this joy riding about the skies, you have one day left!'

Dijun cried, 'But how?'

'Take my golden bow and arrow and send for Houyi. He is the greatest archer, tell him to shoot down all but one crow.'

Dijun returned to the sun mountain and sent for Houyi as commanded, but as a father he found it impossible to ask Houyi to shoot his own sons.

'Just scare them, use your archery skills to frighten them into good behaviour and bring them to heel. They're just a bit wild that's all.' he coaxed, 'Shoot at the carriage, let them feel your arrows whistle over their heads as close as a shave, then they'll pack it in and no harm done.'

But Houyi angered by the devastation they had caused lost his head and shot down all but one of the suns.

After Houyi had carried out this task the Emperor wished to reward him, but still he nursed doubts as to whether Houyi should be forgiven. He sent for Xiezhi, a solitary creature who lived in the Manchurian skies. Xiezhi was able to discern falsehood from the truth. He had a single horn in the centre of his head, which he used to gore liars. The emperor sat upon his throne and gathered his court around. He then asked the jealous servant to step forward and to repeat what Houyi had said that fateful day in the kitchens.

The servant knew if he repeated his slanderous lies in front of Xiezhi he

would be gored by his horn so he said, 'Houyi said nothing sire, he wasn't even in the kitchen.'

The emperor turned red with rage, 'So you think you've escaped death by goring? Very well! But I shall send you to the fifth court of hell where you will be made to climb a mountain of knives, then your tongue will be pulled from your mouth and you'll be hung by hooks over a fire until you are dead.'

Everyone rejoiced as the jealous servant cowered and shook.

He begged for mercy, 'I have always admired you Sire. My only desire is your enrichment.'

Then he realised his mistake, but it was too late as Xiezhi gored his chest, ripping his heart out for the lies he'd just uttered.

Then the black Wuchang appeared, its face a horrifying mask of anger. Wuchang caught hold of the servant's soul, it was slimy and sticky and stuck to his fingers and he whisked it away to hell.

That night the emperor went to see the queen mother.

'About Houyi?' he wheedled, 'I've banished him from heaven, he's no longer immortal and I need him back.'

The queen mother stamped her hoofed feet and growled, 'How many times have I bloody told you? Once it's done, it's done. There's no going back!'

The emperor stroked her wild hair and whispered, 'My precious one. More special to me than all the heavens, more beautiful than all the jade maidens. Surely you and no other can find a solution for me?'

She snarled baring her leopard's fangs, 'Cut the crap, lend me your nine toothed rake for a year and I'll give you an immortality pill made by the Jade hare, it's my last one.'

'No! Not the ice metal rake?'

'Yes!'

The emperor gave in to the queen mother and the following new moon he set off for the jade forest. And there amidst the dense dark trees the emperor found Houyi resting by a pool, and he rewarded him with the pill that granted eternal life. He advised him of its dangers and told him not to swallow the pill immediately, but first to prepare himself by praying and fasting for a year.

'This is the last pill.' he told Houyi, 'it will take the jade hare one thousand years to make another, so you must keep it safe. When the time comes you may split the pill in half and share it with your wife.'

Houyi took the pill home and hid it behind a roof beam.

Meanwhile, Dijun the sun god was consumed day by day with grief and rage. He was furious that Houyi had killed nine of his errant children and as a father he could not forgive him, and so he spent his waking hours planning how to get his revenge.

It so happened that Houyi was summoned away again by the Emperor. He was sent to deal with Fei Lian, Lord of the winds, who created storms that swept across the middle kingdom, uprooting crops and tearing down houses.

Fei Lian had the body of a strong bull that rippled with power under his

glowing black fur. He had one huge red eye in the centre of his broad forehead and a long thrashing serpent's tail covered with razor sharp scales.

Houyi passed many days searching for him. The emperor had given him a cloak gifted with the power of flight, and Houyi would follow the howling winds over the plains, sweeping high along the mountains, racing through deep chasms, until one day he saw the big powerful bull galloping at the forefront of a windstorm.

He flew low to keep out of sight and eventually discovered the wind lord's hiding place; it was a dark cave on a jagged mountain.

Fei Lian had seen Houyi chasing behind him, and when he reached his cave he transformed himself into a puff of thick black smoke. Then he hid inside a sack in the deepest corner.

Houyi approached the cave entrance, his golden bow and arrow vibrating and humming. He stepped inside and heard a deep breath inhaling and exhaling, and then he spied the sack in the dark. It was expanding and shrinking like a lung in the corner of the cave. He shot at it with his arrow injuring Fei Lian's knee.

Fei Lian let out a cry, as black smoke streamed from the sack until at last he appeared before Houyi in his true form.

Houyi cried out to him, 'The arrow tip was poisoned by the queen mother of the western heavens. You'll be dead by sunset.'

Fei Lian lay on the cave floor, his deep red blood pouring like a river from his wound.

Then Houyi told him, 'She will send a remedy by the rain bird if you give your word to stop making trouble.'

And so Fei Lian promised to behave and Houyi was free to return home.

Meanwhile, during her husband's long absence, Chang'e had noticed a white beam of light beckoning from the roof rafters. And one night she had taken a ladder and discovered for herself the glowing lustrous white pill.

From that night on whenever she was feeling sad and alone she would hold the tiny round shiny pill in her hand. It was like a beautiful pearl full of mysteries, and she wondered what it was and why her husband had hidden it there.

Dijun the sun god had never given up waiting for the chance to get his revenge on Houyi, and he eagerly listened to news from his spy at the jade palace.

'The queen mother asked the jade hare for an immortality pill, and she has given it to Houyi. And right now he's far away from home on a mission for the emperor.'

A plan formed in Dijun's mind and he asked his friend Peng, a giant bird with awesome flying power, to visit Chang'e dressed as a young archer and trick her.

Peng had often flown with the sun crows, chasing and hiding with them through the skies and he missed them sorely.

Eventually he agreed to follow Dijun's orders and flew to the hunting lodge in the jade forest. Once there he metamorphosed into a man and pretended to be one of Houyi's apprentice archers.

He tugged on his forelock and bowed before Chang'e knocking his head upon the ground, and told her, 'I'm tortured by guilt and remorse. I know that everyone believes your husband to be a great man but you should know the truth.'

Her eyes widened in shock, 'If you have something to say, spit it out.'

'Ever since Houyi was banished from heaven he has never rested. He went in secret to visit the queen mother of the western heavens and asked her how to make an elixir to regain his immortality.' Peng trembled, waiting to see her reaction.

Chang'e tossed her head, 'So what? Why shouldn't he?'

'The queen mother gave him the most evil instructions and your husband has killed and ground up the body of a different adolescent boy every night for one hundred nights.' Peng's voice quavered, 'Now he has made a pill and hidden it somewhere.'

Chang'e looked up at the roof beam where the pearly pill shone and Peng noticed the ladder underneath.

'My noble lady, give me the pill.' he implored, 'Your evil husband doesn't deserve the reward of immortality.'

He pretended to jump for it, hoping that Chang'e in her shaken state of confusion would grab it and swallow it. In a flash, Chang'e ran up the ladder and snatched the pill from the rafters. She held it suspended between her rose red lips. She was undecided.

'Will you wait for his return?' Peng asked her slyly, 'Will you try and reason with him? Try to stop him taking this pill, which has caused so many deaths? If he takes it, you'll be left alone and mortal!'

She screamed, 'Who gives a damn if he comes back? I don't care a baby's arse if he comes back. I'll be revolted by the sight of him.' She tossed the pill down her throat.

'Oh passionate and headstrong lady, forgive me for I have deceived you.' Peng's face flamed red with shame, 'Know that I lied, and that the pill was given to Houyi by the emperor himself.'

And in a crack of lightning he had disappeared leaving Chang'e alone.

Sadly without a year of meditation and fasting, she found herself flying out of control straight to the moon unable to stop her self.

Houyi returned home in that moment and saw his wife flying away. He could hear her desperate cries for help. He tried to seize her, but she was already far beyond his reach. Houyi pursued her halfway across the heavens but in the end he was forced to return to Earth. The strong winds were too great a match for Houyi's magical winged cloak, and so he lost his wife.

His heart shrivelled when he learnt that Chang'e had swallowed the whole pill. She was condemned to live alone forever on the moon with only the jade hare for company. Chang'e commanded the jade hare to make another pill, which she would send to her husband. And year after year, she and the jade hare spent their days grinding magic herbs.

As time past by Houyi grew bitter and twisted. He couldn't stand to think he had lost his wife and so he pleaded with the emperor to intervene.

'I can not live without my true love.' he cried.

The emperor told him to go to the queen mother and so he went and begged her for help.

She spat green phlegm into her jade spittoon and screeched, 'For the last time! I've told the emperor and now I'm telling you. Once it's done, it's bloody done and dusted! My spells can never be undone.'

He dropped to his knees, his heart broken.

'Oh very well!' she snarled, 'When you die a mortal death, you may build a home on the sun mountain and visit your wife once a year on the night of the harvest moon.'

As more years passed Houyi grew reckless and bitter towards life. He became an evil tyrant, ruling his kingdom on earth with great cruelty.

He came to hate fairy stories and legends, he loathed poetry and anything that reminded him of love and lost happiness.

So he decreed that all books should be burnt, except those on divination, medicine, astrology and agriculture. He burned more than five hundred scholars alive for owning forbidden books and bonfires of poetry and poets lit the night sky. He threatened hundreds more scholars with torture if they didn't find a way for him to attain immortality.

Still he sought the elixir of everlasting life, still he dreamed of reclaiming his wife. He sent ships filled with men and women to search for the mystical Penglai Mountains; where the land was white as snow and jewels grew on trees with fruits that granted eternal life. But if they returned without the promised elixir of immortality they would be executed. So no one ever came back, instead they sailed away and landed on the eastern islands to begin a new life. All began to hate and dread him, and they longed for his death.

Houyi dedicated his waking hours to hunting deep in the Jade forest with a wild band of mortals, and he taught them the secrets of archery. His best apprentice was Feng Meng. But even though Feng's skills grew and strengthened he could never beat his master in an archery contest, and over time the poisonous seed of envy began to grow in his heart. Feng Meng decided to murder his master. He believed himself justified by Houyi's cruelty to his people and he planned the assassination with two other archers.

One day they invited Houyi to go hunting deep within the jade forest. They spread out in four different directions, North, South, East and West. After one hundred paces Feng Meng doubled back along the path. Sun beams shone through the wet blackness and further ahead he saw Houyi standing in a clearing of felled trees. Treading softly he crept up behind and swung his club striking Houyi's shoulder blade. The bone shattered making a sharp cracking sound and Houyi went down. He rolled in the dirt and struggled mightily to his feet. His arm hung from its bloodied socket as he stumbled in front of Feng Meng. The second attack commenced. Feng Meng swung his club and smashed the base of Houyi's spine, the searing pain took all the fight from him and with a piercing howl he crashed to the ground amidst the rotting tree trunks.

The other two archers heard his cries and ran to the clearing where they gleefully watched as Houyi writhed on the ground, arching like an axed pit viper, rocking from side to side. Feng Meng took a deep breath while his face



darkened and his eyes bulged, then he raised the club high in the air and brought it down hard. They heard a dull clunk as the club broke Houyi's neck. He lay there among the felled trees trying to lift his head while his hands clawed in the dirt. The clearing was eerily silent except for Houyi's laboured rasping breath. There was a faint aroma around them of fragrant camphor wood smoke and close by two crested larks flew.

Feng Meng sensed his comrades watching him in silence as he rained blow after blow down upon Houyi. The smell of sour blood seeped up his nostrils, his hands were covered in blood, his club was slippery with blood, blood splashed in his face. Then he stood still and saw he had beaten Houyi's head to a dark pulp, like a crushed pomegranate, spewing shiny red flesh and juice. He watched as bloody bubbles gurgled from Houyi's smashed nose.

The crested skylarks hovered above Houyi, fluttering and warbling a sweeter liquid song, while his left leg jerked and thumped against a rotten tree stump like a hammer on a drum, and blood streamed from his ears and mouth making a beautiful pattern as it spread and flowed across the forest floor like the delicate tendrils of a vine.

Feng Meng was applauded a hero by the earth folk who'd lived under Houyi's evil and violent rule. However the emperor had Feng Meng and his collaborators sent to the seventh palace of hell.

After his death Houyi ascended to the sun mountain and built himself a palace there, facing the home of Chang'e on the moon. And till this day she is still there with the hare, and they are still pounding and grinding the magical ingredients for the elixir of immortality and other potions. Once a year, on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, Houyi visits his wife. That is the reason why the moon is very full and beautiful on that night."

\*

Mandy answered the telephone.

'Hello,' she chirped.

'Who's that?'

'My name's Mandy. I'm Jin Yu's serving maid. May I take a message?'

He got really angry when she answered the phone like this, but she couldn't resist.

'Ahh so it's you! The gilded lily, soon to be wed to my fat friend. Please tell him to come to the phone. I'm Hoi Fat and in dire need.'

Mandy ran across the courtyard into Jin Yu's study.

'He's on the phone,' she yelled.

'Who?' Jin Yu asked her.

'The fat man.'

Jin Yu didn't know whether to be relieved or worried, he'd soon know. He picked up the telephone on his desk.

'Where are you?' he asked Hoi Fat

'I'm waiting for you in Betong. Come to Pah Sung Hotel, it's above a Chinese cafe in Tetchinda road. I'm in room thirteen. Call Ronnie Kiambang and get me a passport in my name, he owes me a favour.'

‘What the hell are you doing there?’ he barked, ‘Why do you need a passport?’

‘The bastards wouldn’t drop all the charges. There are the group things.’

‘What group things?’

‘The videos, they found them. They told me to disappear fast, if I show up anywhere I’ll be arrested. They gave me a jail guard suit, called me a taxi and paid my ride to Thailand. I’m stuck here now with no cash in conspicuous clothes.’

‘How did you get across the border?’

‘In the boot of the taxi. I’m going to ask for political asylum in Australia.’

Jin Yu sighed, ‘So why do you need a fake passport?’

‘In case they turn me down, I’ll fly to the UK. I’m still officially married to the English bitch, they’ll have to let me in.’

Jin Yu put down the phone while Mandy stood over him. Her face was suffused with a rosy glow; her eyes sparkled. She had a look of breathless anticipation and excitement.

‘We can’t go.’ he told her, ‘We have our wedding.’

‘Bugger the wedding! We can get married anytime. This is an emergency.’

His heart sank, he seethed with anger at fate and she gave him no choice.

They were driving through the early evening traffic on the way to meet Ronnie Kiambang at the Majestic Station Hotel bar. Mandy was fiddling with the dials on the radio. They were listening to ‘love me tender’ stuck in a traffic jam. He looked at her. She was sitting still perched on the edge of the seat, lit up by the red traffic light like a statue in a temple. On the bridge over the Kinta River they heard the radio news; the police were still searching for Chung Hoi Fat who’d escaped from Penang jail.

She moaned, ‘It’s not fair, I thought you’d paid to get him off.’

‘I did,’ Jin Yu told her, ‘but there’s other stuff he’s done they wont drop. It seems I got him out of prison but not off the hook.’

‘So he won’t be able to come back? Not ever?’

‘No, he’ll have to live abroad. He’s been living abroad all his life, at least in his head.’

Jin Yu pulled up at the station car park.

‘Wait for me, I’ll be as quick as I can.’

‘I want to come too.’ she said, and got out the jeep and followed him through the hotel courtyard.

Ronnie Kiambang sat at the end of the veranda, camouflaged by wilting palms in brass jardinières stained with verdigris. The fans spun slowly wafting heat and dust through the air, while dark waiters in white sarongs hid behind the stuccoed columns. In that moment Jin Yu remembered how Mandy had once sat there, like a wayward concubine drinking maotai and flashing her knickers. It seemed a lifetime ago. They sat down and waited while Ronnie ordered a round of drinks. Jin Yu paid

and as soon as the waiter had gone, Ronnie took a passport from his jacket pocket and pushed it across the table.

'That's not him.' Jin Yu said, staring at the passport photo of a middle aged Chinese man.

'Name says it's him, Chung Hoi Fat. Come on man!' Ronnie scoffed, 'All Chinese look the same to the British.'

Jin Yu shook his head, 'No, It's nothing like him.'

'You know him too well lah!' Ronnie sighed, he turned to Mandy, 'Let her have a look.'

Jin Yu handed Mandy the passport.

Ronnie asked her, 'Is that Hoi Fat or not?'

Mandy squinted at the passport photo, turning it in the weak light, 'I've only seen him in the papers. But it looks like him to me, more or less. It's true.' she told Jin Yu, 'they'll never see the difference, they never really look. Chinese are just Chinese.'

They left with the passport and drove north for Lenggong and Gerik along a hilly terrain shrouded in thick forest. The road coiled and twisted in the dark, jolting them awake. He looked at her and knew she loved adventures. She had a road map spread over her legs covered in biscuit crumbs and fag ash.

The dull yellow moon wheel rolled through clouds that drifted low over the hills.

'I'm dying of hunger.' she told him.

They stopped in Gerik and found a mamok shop still open and ordered hot frothy tea and rotis with dhal sambal. They drove further north through the dense forest, the massive branches reached into the night sky forming a heavy canopy strewn with moonbeams. It began to rain, and he could barely see the road.

'I can't drive much further tonight.' he told her.

They reached Pengkalan Hulu a few miles from the border, and then he said, 'It's no use we have to stop.' He pulled over in the main street and ran under his jacket into a café. When he came back he was drenched. 'There's a hot spring resort called Chalet Air Panas. We'll have to stay there.'

Later they stood dripping in the hotel room.

She looked about her and told him, 'I'm sleeping in my clothes.'

'Me too!' he agreed.

She sniffed the air, 'It smells.'

'I'll open the windows.' He looked at her, wondering if she might give up and ask him to take her home.

'Do you think there might be lice?' she asked.

'Do you want to leave?'

'No, it's OK I suppose, I just don't want to get lice in my hair.'

They lay on the bed, their heads resting on his damp jacket. The cold night air and mist filled the room.

'I'm freezing.' she complained.

He felt her shivering and wrapped his arms around her.

'I can't sleep.' she whispered.

'Shush.' he told her, 'just close your eyes and stop talking.'

They woke at dawn and hurried outside the chalet, it was cold and Jin Yu put his jacket around Mandy's shoulders.

'Shall we drive into town and get some breakfast?' he suggested.

She looked doubtful. 'Can't you wake them up and tell them we're hungry?'

On their way to the cafeteria they passed by a stagnant brown canal. There was a rusting tin sign 'bathing without a costume in the hot springs is not permitted'.

They sat at a table with a lime green plastic cloth.

'Do you think we're eating last night's dinner?' she asked him.

He smiled at her, 'I guess we are.'

She put her hand on his wrist and told him, 'I'm dog tired, slept like shit and I love you this morning more than any other day.'

They arrived in Betong early morning and found the Pah Sung Hotel. Beyond the battered café tables there was a reception desk in a dark corner where a Thai man stood watching them. He had large bags under his bloodshot eyes and his skin fell in folds from his chin to his neck like a fat man who had starved too fast. There were Thai girls up and down the staircase that led to the hotel rooms. An elephantine man stumbled down the stairs with his eyes half closed, and he had a little Thai girl under each arm propping him up. Their heads poked out from under his armpits as if they were carrying him along. The man was propelled over to the desk and the girls started nattering loudly.

Jin Yu turned to Mandy, 'I don't know what name he's checked in with, he told me he's in room thirteen.'

'Lets just go up and look for his room.' she pulled his hand.

He didn't want to leave Mandy alone and he didn't want Hoi Fat to meet her. 'I'll go and find him and then we're out of here. You wait for me in the café.' he told her.

'I want to come too.'

They went upstairs and walked down a long corridor. Some of the doors were wide open with people wandering in and out of the bedrooms. They saw card games in dark rooms with the curtains still drawn and smoke hung like thick grey smog. Other doors were shut and they couldn't find Hoi Fat's room. In the end Jin Yu gave up and went back downstairs to the man at the reception.

'You are his friend?' the man smiled slyly, 'We don't have room thirteen. Tourist no like thirteen, say unlucky.'

'So is he in room twelve or room fourteen?' Jin Yu wanted to get it over with. It would never be easy with bloody Hoi Fat.

'He can't pay room, no money.' the man told Jin Yu, 'He say friend pay when coming. He have room outside, more cheaper.'

The man led them back through the café and out through a side door. He pointed, 'You see rooms down there? End one on left.'

There was a small stony courtyard garden with patches of grassy mud. It was filled with old plastic chairs and tables and a rusting motorbike with no wheels. A lonely cricket chirped somewhere between the straggly grass and white sunlight broke through the heavy black clouds making a beautiful sunbeam. There was a guava tree by the wall and a light breeze blew through the branches raining white petals upon them. Mandy reached up and stroked the clusters of yellow tipped stamens like tufts of wild cottonseed hair. The fallen fruit lay around them exuding a strong sweet musky odour. The end room door was open and a faded flowered curtain billowed in the doorway, he stepped through and was hit by a blast of hot air.

They found Hoi Fat hanging dead in the room. He'd hung himself from the ceiling fan. His features were engorged, his skin blue, his face was covered with blood splattered marks from burst vessels and his eyes were red. His swollen tongue hung from his mouth, there was a puddle of urine on the floor and shit in his underpants and down his legs. Jin Yu turned to run out the door but Mandy stood in the way.

She held her hands over her nose and mouth and spoke to him through her fingers. 'There's a message on the mirror.'

It was there, scrawled in tiny writing with a felt tip pen.

Sorry to make you come all this way, thought I could hack it but now I've got the heebie jeebies and have to finally get my face back.

Just leave me here with the passport, so they know who I am, and burn the uniform and please throw the gun in a lake on your way home, I don't want problems for old Dixon, he's not a bad chap he kept up his side of the deal. Really sorry you wasted your money, suppose I could have hung myself in prison, would have been cheaper, any guard would have bought me a rope for fifty bucks.

See that's my problem, I'm wishy washy, want to be daring but can't face the music, escape from jail and too scared to be free, not after having signed the rape stuff, some how I'd have been made to pay for that too, might as well just get it over with.

Well fat boy, Thanks. You were and will always be a true friend, the only one I've ever had, you're a gentleman and a scholar and all that.

Jin Yu stood staring at the message, the aroma of urine and shit faded and he could smell something smoky. Mandy had lit mosquito coils and placed them in the doorway.

She looked at Jin Yu and murmured, 'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault,' he told her, 'I wish you'd waited in the café.'

She sighed, 'We have to clean the mirror. I'll do it.'

Jin Yu wondered how they could talk like this, like it was nothing, why they didn't scream and shed tears or beat their chests or run away. Mandy went into the bathroom stall, it was separated from the room by a dirt grey curtain. She returned with handfuls of wet toilet paper and she began to rub the felt pen off the mirror.

She said, 'The jail guard uniform is in the bathtub and there's a gun.'

He caught her eye in the mirror and told her, 'We can't burn the uniform or throw the gun, not here, not now.'

'There's a duty free shopper over there, stuff them in the bag and we'll take it with us.' She turned to face him, 'Look it's all come off! Do you think the mirror is too clean now? I mean look at the state of the room.'

She spat at the mirror and began to smear it with the dirty toilet paper. Jin Yu went through the ragged curtain and stood staring into the pitted bathtub. He picked up the uniform, the last thing Hoi Fat had worn. The gun lay in the bottom of the bath in a puddle of rusty brown water. He reached for it and gently wrapped it in the guard's jacket. He took one last look at the pockmarked cankerous bath and ducked back through the curtain. He helped Mandy shove everything into the duty free bag. They both avoided looking at Hoi Fat hanging like a pig on a butcher's hook.

She whispered, 'Please don't do the right thing. Don't stay around giving statements and don't try to have him taken home to be buried. Please just do as Fat said. Leave him here with the passport on the bed and just walk out the door.' she grimaced, 'Looking at his face now, the photo will do just fine.'

He shook his head, 'I can't just walk out. I have to see the man at reception, give him money to cover the hotel bill and plenty extra.'

'What if he calls the cops?'

'He wont, I'll sort it out. You leave first without me.'

'No.' her voice wavered, she watched him as he laid Hoi Fat's passport on the bed, and knew he wouldn't change his mind. She sighed, 'OK, I'll take the bag and wait for you in the car.'

They went through the café and the man at the reception walked slowly towards them. Jin Yu's heart beat as he watched Mandy keep walking. He watched as she walked through the café tables, not stopping, not turning round just looking straight ahead. She stepped out on to the street and she was gone.

The man was beaming at Jin Yu, 'So you see your friend?' he asked.

'No, we stood outside his door calling and calling. There was no answer. Maybe he's sleeping.' Jin Yu dropped his voice, 'I want to give you money to cover his bill, somewhere private.'

The man nodded, 'Sure you can. Come in my office.'

His office was a tiny box room full of beer crates and stacked chairs. Jin Yu handed him ten hundred dollar bills from a wodge he'd assembled for Hoi Fat. The man looked very happy.

'My friend has hung himself.' Jin Yu said.

'What you say?' the man gasped.

'He's dead, hanging from the ceiling fan.'

They were staring at each other, wondering what would happen next. The man shrugged, his expression cagey as he looked at Jin Yu with a mixture of dislike and distrust.

He grumbled at him, 'What you want now? Call Police?'

Jin Yu held out the thick roll of bills still in his hand and said, 'No, you can find him tomorrow.' He smiled, 'You've never seen me and I never gave you any money.'

It was easy, he'd heard those lines before. The man looked at Jin Yu, he looked at the cash, his fingers closed tightly over the roll of bills and he shoved them in his trouser pocket real fast. Then he smiled revealing three lonesome yellowed teeth like old tombstones in a dirt graveyard.

'No problem! I never see you. I don't know you.' He leaned forward, his face earnest and trusty, his voice was low and snaky now, 'No worries, no one ever go down there. No cleaning. No room service. Maybe I find him next week.'

Jin Yu left the hotel and stepped out on to the pavement. His heart fluttered as he saw Mandy. She hadn't gone to the car, but was waiting for him on the street outside the café her face white and drawn.

He took her hand and walked quickly down the road.

'Don't worry, no one will bother to go in his room for a few days.' he told her.

'What if the reception bloke mentions us?'

He held her hand tighter and walked faster, 'He won't, because he gets to keep the money.'

'You're a genius.' she said, and swung the bag gaily as they went on down the road.

They drove out of Betong under the pouring rain. Through the mean streets fogged with mountain mist, Pye-dogs scavenged in rubbish heaps. Yellow and orange temple flags flapped in the wind showing the path to the temple. A border town in the wild, full of cafés and slit eyed girls. Street gutters cluttered with peddlers from the countryside, smelling of sweat and fresh cut grass, squatting with their bamboo poles and baskets while they chewed on buns that filled their mouths with sugar. The sun broke through the grey sky, burning through the leaden clouds, drowning the gloomy town in brilliant rainbows, a city in the fog with beautiful flowers. Now they were driving away from Betong Jin Yu felt relieved.

'Where are we going to get rid of the gun?' she asked him.

'Throw it in a dustbin.'

'No, Fat said throw it in a lake.' Her voice brightened, 'Lets take it to

Pengkalan. After all we've left poor Fat here, at least we can take his gun home.'

'What? Are you mad?'

'I'll hide it in my blouse.' She told him as though it were already decided.

'No.'

'Yes.'

'Are you mad?'

He pulled over on the side of the road as cars and trucks whizzed past them, and told her, 'If they check the car, you'll get arrested and they'll throw away the key. Do you have any idea where that gun came from?'

'No, have you?' she was grinning at him.

'Look, if Hoi Fat had it, then it's bad, really bad. I'll throw it in a rubbish skip before we cross the border.'

'No. We have to follow Fat's last wishes.' She arched her eyebrows, 'And not just any lake, a Malaysian one. It's all we have left of him.'

He hated her when she acted like this, irrationally believing she had to fulfil a quest because she'd seen a black cat or heard a song on the radio. He remembered the time he'd taken her to the river bridge at midnight, to empty a bottle of Maotai into the brown heaving torrent, because she'd overheard an old drunk in the station bar say, if the Kinta river were a river of liquor, all dogs would go to heaven, and she just knew.

'Mandy give me the bag I'm going to throw it away.' His voice rose, 'Listen! Hoi Fat was a drunk. He messed up everything he touched. He couldn't help it. He was bad luck.'

'No.' she said again, looking away out the car window.

He started up the car and drove but he wanted to stop and beat her into submission. If only they were on a deserted road he'd slap her, tie her up and throw her in the boot, he'd had enough. They were getting closer to the border.

'If you wont throw the gun away, get out the car and walk to the goddamn lake and throw it in your self.' He stopped the car and told her, 'I'm not driving through the checkpoint with a gun.'

'OK, I'll hitch a lift with a truck driver and meet you on the other side.'

She got out the car and stood hugging the carrier bag to her, waiting for him to drive away. She was proud and stubborn and he couldn't do it. He turned off the engine and got out. He walked slowly over to her, he put his hands on her shoulders and then he began shaking her.

'Why do you have to be such a stupid bitch? I love you, I can't leave you here.' He pulled her to him and held her pinned in his arms, 'Mandy please for the last time.'

She told him, 'Sorry, I can't.'

They stood looking at each other. Her eyes were shining.

'Let me hide it in my blouse, please, please?'

After, driving away from the border checkpoint they saw billboard posters of drug smugglers hanging by their necks, like criminal's heads on pikes at the city gates.



And later they stood together under the hot sun at Taman Tasik Lake, just outside Pengkalan Hulu.

She looked about her feeling enchanted. 'It's beautiful just like a Chinese willow pattern plate.' she whispered.

The forest was reflected in shining green and there was a small restaurant on stilts over the lake built of weathered timber board.

She sang a rhyme, 'Two birds flying high, a Chinese vessel sailing by, a willow tree hanging over, a bridge with three men or four, a Chinese temple there it stands, built upon the river sands.' She stopped and smiled, 'I can't remember the rest but there's a story too. Shall I tell you?'

He stroked her hair while the sound of myriads of cicadas vibrated in the air, rising and swelling then silence.

'Listen.' she said, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm, 'A rich mandarin had a beautiful daughter who fell in love with his servant. He sent the poor man away and built a fence to keep them apart. A wealthy lord arrived by boat carrying a box of jewels as a gift for her. They were to be married the day the blossoms fell from the willow tree. So she took the jewels and ran away with the servant, and her father and the wealthy lord chased them over the bridge, but they escaped in the boat.'

'That's lovely.' He lent and kissed her.

'Now, shall I throw the gun in the lake?' she asked him.

He looked over at the restaurant, 'No it will be suspicious. They're watching us.'

'No problem,' she squeezed his arm, 'First we'll get drunk and fill ourselves with delicious food then we'll have a wander.'

They drank red rice wine and ate sticky rice cakes. He could see the outline of the gun through her blouse, tucked in the waistband of her skirt. Her rosy lips were lightly coated with brown sugar and she smiled enchantingly at him. He wondered at this girl whom he loved, who was usually so crotchety and yet now so sweet and happy, he wondered why, and was afraid of the answer.

After, far away from the restaurant on the lakeshore, she opened the buttons of her blouse and pulled the gun out. She held it with both hands.

He hissed, 'For god's sake what do you think you're doing?'

She laughed, 'I just want to shoot it, just once.'

She pointed the gun at the sun.

'You're mad.' he cried out and lunged for her.

She pulled the trigger as he knocked her down on the sand. There was a sharp click then silence. Jin Yu stood above her. She lay there with her legs spread out, her skirt rucked up round her thighs, her blouse open and the gun clasped to her tits like a talisman.

She chuckled, 'There weren't any bullets.'

He really saw her in that moment and she looked so wonderful to him, so gorgeous, so mad; he knew he could never let her go. She surrendered the gun. He took it from her and chucked it in the lake then lay down on the sand beside her.

Jin Yu was sitting opposite his brother in the office while Han Yu read the newspaper out loud.

‘Chung Hoi Fat found dead in Thai border town. Aspiring MJP politician, who recently escaped from Penang Prison where he was being held in custody, was found dead in a hotel in Betong Thailand. Due to the extreme state of decomposition he was buried locally. Cause of death is unknown. The family will be holding a memorial service for him at St Marks Church Ipoh on Sunday.’

Han Yu folded the paper and pushed it across the table towards Jin Yu.

‘Are you going to the service?’

Jin Yu reddened, ‘No, we are flying to Hong Kong tomorrow I have to book the wedding again.’

‘Do you really believe a ring on her finger will stop her leaving you?’

‘I must marry her. I can’t help it.’

‘Have you decided on the new date?’

‘Not yet, I’ll find another church and book for mid November. So will you come?’

‘Look, I’ll see what I can do.’ Han Yu sighed, ‘To tell the truth I’d rather give you a wedding here in Ipoh when she is twenty-one.’

‘I want you to be there with me this time.’

‘Look at it from my point of view. Your wedding day was last week and where were you?’ he snorted, ‘Thailand, stuck in a nature reserve with gastroenteritis. And where was I? In Hong Kong, invited to a wedding that never happened.’

Han Yu stopped and looked away feeling guilty. He had bet with their uncle and cousins that the wedding wouldn’t go ahead. They’d made bets on whether Mandy would jilt Jin Yu at the altar, or if neither of them would turn up. Their uncle had bet she’d go through with it and Han Yu had won a lot of money. Now the wedding was on again and earlier this morning their cousin had called, the family bets were back on too. Wedding ten to one, no wedding two to one, and divorce within one year three to one.

‘She’s flying from Hong Kong to London to collect her things and then she’ll ship them to KL.’ Jin Yu stood up slowly, ‘I’ll be back in two days.’

‘Has she informed her parents? Are they coming?’

‘No, she says she’ll send them a postcard when it’s done.’

That night Jin Yu took Mandy to her favourite noodle shop in George Town. In two days she would be gone and he felt a gnawing sickness deep in his guts, he’d been here before, wondering if she’d come back to him. He wanted her to look at him and tell him she couldn’t live without him. She didn’t say what he wanted, instead she was coquettish and flip and her shirt buttons were half undone. He could see her nipples pushing against the flimsy material and he didn’t care, he was ready to go under.

He leaned forward and stroked her hair, tucking it behind her ear. He

whispered:

‘Will I make you happy? I want to make you happy.’

He sat smiling, watching her and feeling almost serene when suddenly without warning, a van crammed with Policemen screeched to a halt across the street. Jin Yu watched them pile into a café on the other side of the road.

‘Look, I think we should go.’ He stood up.

‘Hold on, I want to see what’s happening.’

She ate her ice cream slowly, watching as the policemen emerged from the café with a crowd of Chinese girls. They were all handcuffed to one long chain and were being pulled out of the bar like a crazy snake twisting left and right. They shouted and pulled in every direction. Some had fallen down and were being dragged by the chain across the dusty road. They wore party dresses and high heels and each one had a tick or a cross marked on her forehead or chest. They were loaded into the police van.

The waiter knew Mandy fairly well and he grinned at her while he wiped down a greasy table with a dirty dishcloth. He told her:

‘My brother he’s a policeman. He says these women wreck hundreds of marriages. Many wives complain to police station about them. See now police arrest them.’

She watched them being driven away and asked:

‘Why the crosses and ticks?’

‘Crosses for foreign, ticks for Malaysian. Easier for sorting.’

\*

Jin Yu was alone in Hong Kong; Mandy had left the day before and he’d spent the morning searching for a church. He’d eventually found St Teresa’s in Kowloon, where they would have a wedding blessing after the civil ceremony. The date was fixed for November 21st. Back at his hotel he tried calling Mandy, she’d given him the phone number of her friend’s flat in London.

‘What about your parents?’ he’d asked.

‘Shan’t be staying with them.’ she’d told him.

She should have arrived hours ago but there was no answer. He tried again, his heart winced, over and over, no answer. He went out for a walk and wandered through the streets without knowing where he was going. He found himself in an open air market teeming with people shoving shoulder to shoulder, while street hawkers hunkered down beside their gunny sacks, spitting shining gobs of phlegm in the dirt. He didn’t look where he was walking and nearly stumbled over an old man crouched on a kerbstone. He was dressed in rags, a tattered straw coolie pulled over his wrinkled brow, his lips were greasy, his face flushed. The old man laughed at Jin Yu as he lifted the lid from his cooking pot, and puffs of steam billowed upwards hiding his kindly face. He revealed a shining golden brown broth with pig’s knuckles and gristle floating on the surface, and ladled out a bowlful to show off his beautiful soup. He offered it to Jin Yu

while he held out his other hand, open and empty, a supplicating look showing through the steamy mist. Jin Yu pushed the bowl away from him. He saw the hawker's sweet smile, his yearning, his sadness, his miserable life. Jin Yu's heart ached and tears stung his eyes. He knew he was crying, standing there alone on a kerbside. He bent his head in shame and rummaged in his pockets, and then he tossed some dollar bills in the old man's lap and turned away. He walked back to the hotel.

He tried to call Mandy again and again, and then in the end he panicked. Had she run away? He had a flight back to Kuala Lumpur that night. He became mad with an ugly fear that made his heart twist. His uncle could not help him now. He thought of Heidi; feeling like a player throwing down the last card, knowing he was doomed to go and look for her. Heidi would have left Hong Kong by now, yet he had to try.

Jin Yu found Heidi's building near the harbour, he stood alone outside wondering if he should turn back but he knew he couldn't. He pushed his way through the glass swing doors and entered the hall. He checked the row of recessed letterboxes; Heidi's name was still there covered in yellowing sellotape. He climbed the stairs, rang the doorbell and waited. He stood in that stale corridor with glowing oily walls, his head hung low, staring at his shiny leather shoes on the dull red carpet. At last he turned away. Idiot, there was no one there. Then he heard a door bolt shift and he was dumbfounded when Heidi opened the door herself.

'Hi, this is a surprise come in.' she said it like she'd known he'd turn up on her doorstep in the end.

He followed her into a room that stank of stale smoke and unwashed bedding. It was full of clutter and clothes strewn everywhere. She sat back down at a small table next to a kitchenette and kicked a chair away from the table for Jin Yu to sit on.

'So has she run off again?' she scorned, 'Don't tell me you're desperately searching for her and thought I could help you.'

'She went to London, I've tried calling her but there's never anyone at home.'

She chuckled, 'So what do you want me to do? Say a prayer?' Baring her serrated shark's teeth as she laughed, she watched Jin Yu with sharp eyes that were as blue as star sapphires.

'I thought you might have a mutual friend, someone who might know where she is.' He said as an apology.

'What number did she give you?'

He showed her the telephone number Mandy had written down for him.

'I know that number. It's a student digs in Richmond where she used to stay. It has four or five rooms, people move in and out all the time.' She scoffed, 'They've probably cut the line till the bill gets paid.'

He felt relieved.

'Well, if the phone's not working, that explains it.'

'There are phone boxes.' Heidi taunted him, 'She could have called your hotel and left you a message, but I bet she hasn't.'

'I didn't think to check.' He dropped his gaze away from her hard stare.

'No need to,' she spat, 'you won't hear from her. She never got in touch with me again, just swanned off with you. I wanted to come and see her in Malaysia but it all fell through. Long story, I met this guy, he had a yacht and all that. He was smuggling suitcases of grass into Hong Kong. Then he got arrested and I'm still here.'

'Will you be going back home?' he asked.

'Not bloody likely! Do you want a coffee?'

He watched her while she poked around the kitchen.

'So you don't know anyone I could call to get in touch with her?'

'No.'

'What about her parents?'

'Useless. She doesn't get on with them. They probably have no idea where she is. She could be dead for all they know.'

Jin Yu realised she could tell him nothing and he was wasting his time. Heidi sat back down putting a mug of coffee in front of him. There was a small black curly hair floating on the surface.

He tried one last time, 'Look, if she gets in touch with you, will you call me?' He fished a business card from his wallet and placed it on the table.

Heidi stared at the card without picking it up. She shrugged and stared at Jin Yu shaking her head, her lips stretched in a sour grin while she said nothing.

'So what will you do now you're here alone?' Jin Yu asked.

'I'm working at a club. The pay's good. I'm fine. Look you're a nice guy, you should get out before it's too late.'

'What do you mean?'

'Listen Mandy told me something. Never tell her I told you. She said she'd marry you, OK? But then she'd bump you off.'

'What?'

'Yeah, she even planned how! She'd get you all snug and cosy in the bathtub and then knock a radio or a hairdryer in the water. One of life's sad accidents. I just think you should know.'

'No, you're joking, she'd never...'

He couldn't finish.

'Don't believe it, if it makes you feel better. Some people can't see the truth even when it smacks them round the head. You need to cheer up. You're rich you can have your pick. Why don't you come out with me and Karen Foo for a drink? She'd be real happy to hear from you again. Lighten up!'

He barely remembered what he said or did after that, but he found himself back at his hotel blind drunk. He packed to leave on the night flight for Kuala Lumpur and left a pile of cash on the bedside table next to a sleeping woman with pink-rimmed eyelids.

He didn't know what to believe. As soon as he arrived home he asked if Mandy had called, she hadn't, and though he carried the extension around the house with him she never rang.

His heart recoiled whenever Heidi's words crept into his thoughts,

strangling his hopes and poisoning him slowly. Sometimes he reasoned; if it were true, Mandy could have married him months ago and would have killed him before now, instead she'd run off. Of course Mandy never planned to murder him, Heidi was jealous and had made it up. It couldn't be true. Mandy wasn't a killer waiting for the chance, it was just a spiteful lie to cause them trouble, to split them apart.

But they were apart, she'd gone again and her silence was more meaningful than ever. This time he didn't bother asking Han Yu for help to find her. He hated her. He hated that she could fly away and not call him, that she cared so little she could leave him in hell.

\*

The weeks passed and he didn't even have any hope left. Destiny had shit on him and he spent his days in the office and his evenings eating and drinking by himself, watching television and going through business plans and accounts. He ate and ate, always hungry, an emptiness he could never fill. Only when he was fit to burst and blind drunk, he'd drag himself to bed and sleep like a dead man. He couldn't bear the thought that she was alive, living somewhere without him, not thinking of him, and the thought he'd never see her again was killing him. Each day he got fatter and he didn't care. Just before Christmas he got a postcard from her. She told him nothing, just 'I'll be back in January'. The postcard was from Spain and she had drawn a crooked love heart on the back.

*His fingers tear the telegram and he watches it flutter through the air and fall to the ground. He won't go to meet her, like hell he will. She must stand alone waiting for him. And she will wait and she'll wait and he'll never go to her and she'll stand forever waiting under a monsoon rain pouring over her soaking her clothes to her body. Muddy water will swill around her ankles rotting her shoes and later the crimson sun will burn, shredding her sleeves into tattered ribbons fraying into dust and the days will pass by and her dress will become full of holes and ripped by the wind it will fall from her and she will be naked and hungry and no one will see her, and her eyes will turn to sanded glass. Brittle like a parched tree she will crumble to the ground and the street hawkers will set fire to her, to boil their broths in smoking cauldrons, and her ashes will mix with the dirt and she will know he never came to meet her. Yet he knows he's defeated. Sagging like a beggar he picks the ripped telegram from the floor.*

Jin Yu slept in the back of the car, travelling along a road dappled black and gold by sunbeams shining through the dense jungle trees. As the car approached the city Osman shouted at Jin Yu over his shoulder:

'We're here sir! We're nearly at the airport.'

He waited for her to come through the gates.  
'I knew you'd be here,' she said, and he carried her luggage for her.  
'I'm hungry,' she told him, and he took her to a restaurant in the city.  
During lunch neither mentioned the wedding. He asked her:  
What were you doing in Spain?  
'Taking part in protests against bull fighting,' she replied.  
He put his hand in his jacket pocket and took out a bottle of perfume.  
It was wrapped in soft pink tissue paper tied with a gold ribbon. She took it  
and thanked him but didn't unwrap it.

'Gift giving in the Chinese culture: A gift is traditionally refused before it is accepted to demonstrate that the recipient is not greedy. Do not give scissors, knives or other cutting utensils as they indicate a desire to sever the relationship. Flowers do not make good gifts as they are given to the sick and are used at funerals. Do not wrap gifts in mourning colours - white, blue, or black. Wrap the gifts in happy colours - red, pink, or yellow'

George Tan-One Hundred Chinese Customs

He wanted to go straight back to Ipoh that evening, he explained:  
'I've a business meeting early tomorrow morning, I can't get out of it.'  
She shook her head and yawned:  
'I'll stay in KL, I'm too tired to travel anymore today. You can come and  
fetch me tomorrow.'

He took her to a hotel. They stood in the room nearly like strangers  
and she wouldn't look into his eyes. He wanted to make love to her before  
he left. He undressed her like a delicate china doll, like a lost or stolen  
statue that had been returned. He examined her body with his sharp gaze,  
seeing the changes, the damage, noting the cracks and tiny chips. He  
sighed; she was still too lovely not to love.

She pushed him away and said:  
'I'm too tired, I didn't sleep on the plane, come back tomorrow.'  
She pulled the sheets around her and turned her back on him. She lay  
there snuggled in the soft white pillows. He never said, 'Help me Mandy'  
never said, 'I'm on my knees begging you to love me'. He let himself out of  
the room quietly and left.

She slept for hours and finally woke up in the middle of the night,  
wide-awake and starving hungry. She called room service and ordered  
Mee Goring, then had a cool shower and waited till the food arrived. She  
tipped the room boy and after he'd gone she lifted the silver cover and took  
a forkful. The food was bland and cold and she didn't want it.

She decided to slip out of the hotel. There was an all night hawker  
market close by. She walked with her head down, quietly out of the hotel  
foyer and quickly along the streets. She wandered through the market and  
chose a small corner stall, and there she sat under the florescent lights with  
a huge bowl of steaming Nasi Lemak. She wondered whether to call Jin Yu  
when she got back to the hotel. She smiled to herself, imagining waking

him up, she would tell him there was a snake in her bed.

A paper plane landed on her table then another and another, then she saw him. It was the prince, sultan, rajah she couldn't remember. He was sitting with another man not far away. He strode over and joined her at the table.

He said:

'I never thought I'd see you here, alone and free. Or is your fat fiancée hiding behind the counter?'

She laughed and felt herself blush. His eyes brushed over her body like the soft stroke of a bird's wing. She told him she'd just got back to Malaysia and he ordered champagne to celebrate her return. The stall owner was excited, he shook the bottle before releasing the cork, and a fountain of bubbles rained lightly over them.

She said:

'I never knew they had champagne at hawker stalls.'

He swept his jet-black hair over his shoulders and told her:

'He keeps a case just for me.'

They drank to each other and then to the beautiful starry night. His saffron brown hands stroked her wrist.

He whispered:

'Let me give you a lift to your hotel.'

She sat in the back of his Jaguar.

'Wait, one moment,' he said, 'I have to make a phone call. My driver will look after you.'

The man who had been with him at the table was now seated at the steering wheel. Mandy asked him:

'Do you have a light?'

He turned round and passed her a lighter. She lit a cigarette and gave him one too. They sat smoking in silence in the dark car. The driver took a bottle of whisky from the glove compartment. He offered the bottle to Mandy and she shook her head. He drank the whisky like it was water while watching Mandy through the mirror. He watched her flicking ash out the window, watched her cigarette burn red when she sucked it with her pink lips.

The driver told her:

'Do you know my Tunku can do what he likes. Whenever! Wherever!'

'Really?' Mandy looked at him through the mirror.

The driver went on:

'We were at a nightclub last week. There were these two American bitches throwing themselves around the dance floor. You know? Like cheap whores! They started dancing right in front of my Tunku. They were disgusting, ugly, not fit to clean his toilet. I am his bodyguard, he told me to get them off the floor, get them out his view. I told them to move. But no! They kept on dancing, so I went to the one who was shaking her arse at us and punched her in the stomach. She fell on the floor and shit herself and they were thrown out.'

'Then what happened?' Mandy asked.



The driver scoffed:

'Not a thing. Who saw us? No one! But that's nothing. Last year, my Tunku was convicted of shooting dead a man in a nightclub. It was in the newspapers.'

'So he went to jail?' her voice had dropped.

'No. Of course not.' The driver jeered, 'He was quickly pardoned.'

'Why?'

'It's the royal blood!' he turned round in his seat, his dark face beaming in the street light, 'Listen, five years ago his father shot and killed a man near his private helicopter, he thought the man was a smuggler.'

'What happened?' she was loving this story.

'Pardoned of course!' the driver slapped his thigh and chuckled, 'His father is big sultan. He has the fastest cars in Malaysia. Anyone try to overtake, he spray mace in their face. He can do it. He's the sultan! You heard of mace spray?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'You like my Tunku?' the driver asked Mandy. 'He's brave, full of fire. When he was only fifteen he chained up two policemen for two days in a dog kennel because they angered him.'

'He was pardoned of course?' she knew the plot by now.

'Of course!'

'I don't like policemen and I hate dog kennels.' she looked pleased, 'Serves them right.' she added.

The fiery Tunku returned and got into the back seat of the car next to Mandy. He smiled at her, resting his arm around her shoulders, his palm covering her breast. Later back at the hotel he took her to the top floor suite.

She was unsure and whispered:

'I think I should go back to my room.'

He leaned into her and kissed her, twisting her hair in his hand. They drank brandy and smoked cheroots. Later she lay across the bed looking up at an arrow painted on the ceiling pointing to Mecca, until he covered her vision, and she reached up and touched his long black silky hair so strange and beautiful. She kissed his smooth skin, she breathed in the aroma of him, spice and darkness. His almond eyes closed as he came and then she realised it was over. He lay on his back, his black hair fanned out over the white sheet. He threw an arm over her and fell asleep.

Mandy crept back to her room, she chucked her clothes on the floor and lay down, she was still drunk and fell into a dreamless sleep while the sun's red rays permeated the room like fire light.

She awoke later that morning to see Jin Yu sitting on the bed watching her. She scrunched her eyes shut and said in a hoarse voice:

'Can you order me some Alka-Seltzer? I've got a hangover.'

'What? Why?' he asked.

With her eyes still closed she sighed and told him:

'I went out last night, had too much to drink.'

'So you stayed out all night drinking?' His voice was harsh.

'No,' she opened her eyes just a crack and peered at him through her lashes, 'I woke up starving and went out for something to eat.'

'So what time did you get back?'

'I don't know maybe around two or three.' She frowned at him, 'Who cares? Just order me some Alka-Seltzer, my head's splitting.'

He surveyed her tangled yellow hair, her crinkled brow, and then he accused her:

'I tried calling you at five this morning, before I left for Batu Gaja.'

She shrugged:

'I was so tired I never heard the phone.'

'So you're saying you went out alone in the middle of the night for food?' He glared at her, his mouth hard, 'Why didn't you order room service?'

'I did, it was crap, look the plates still there.' she flung her arm, pointing to the window table, 'Shut up interrogating me and leave me alone.'

'Where were you Mandy?'

She didn't answer him and rolled over burying her head in the pillows. He leaned across the bed and pulled her arm.

'Don't turn your back on me.'

He held her chin, turning her to face him; searching her sleepy eyes that even in their remoteness made him want to die.

'Just tell me you were alone last night.'

She sighed and shifted her eyes sideways, away from his gaze. She said sweet as pie:

'I didn't say I was alone. I met that prince bloke, the one from the flower show. His driver calls him Tunku or something. He was at the hawker market. He kept me company while I had dinner, that's all.'

'No!' his voice shot her like a bullet, 'You spent the night with him, I know it.'

'I didn't, I didn't bring him back to the room, nothing happened.' Her heart was thudding now.

He stood up and she realised he was holding a bouquet in his hand. He looked down at her; his eyes wild and mad like an angry dog, full of distrust and hate. He threw the flowers at her and then ran to the bathroom. She could hear him retching.

They were orchids wrapped in silver cellophane, she twisted them around and around looking for a message. Her face burned and she trembled, hoping Jin Yu had brought them for her, yet knowing he'd found them outside the door, left for her by someone else. She couldn't bear it, she felt too naked. She got up and dressed quickly. She didn't know whether to go into the bathroom, she lit a cigarette and waited.

He came back in the room. He was sweating and his eyes were red and bloodshot, she could barely look at him.

'Why?' he spat, 'Do you think I don't care that we aren't married?'

She looked away not knowing how to answer him.

He told her the truth:

‘I have loved you as my wife.’  
 She stood alone in front of him not daring to take one step closer, she willed him to believe her when she said:  
 ‘Look, nothing happened, nothing, nothing.’ Her voice died away to a whisper and the chasm between them widened.  
 He spoke softly:  
 ‘If you share my bed you share my name.’  
 She saw he was crying. She saw that he was a fat sad yellow man, whom she had loved, and loved still somehow.  
 ‘You’re mad, nothing bloody happened!’ she knew it had meant nothing to her.  
 ‘Mad am I? Heidi told me you’d marry me and then kill me.’  
 She laughed; she couldn’t believe it was happening.  
 ‘That’s rubbish, I love you.’  
 It sounded false, it sounded like a lie; tears began to sting her eyes.  
 ‘You love me? She told me you were going to chuck a radio in the bathtub, you were going to electrocute me, how could you?’  
 She remembered Hong Kong, she remembered the coffee, the dreaming, the giggling, shooting the crap.  
 ‘It was a joke!’  
 ‘So you did say it? Heidi wasn’t lying.’  
 ‘It was a fucking joke.’  
 ‘It’s not a joke. How can you say it’s a joke? Not to me! And is it funny that I’ve loved you? Really loved you, ha ha. And just one night, I leave you here, one night, and you spend it with that Tunku. You disgust me. He disgusts me.’  
 He wanted to strike her, yet he turned his back on her and left slamming the door.

Seven Grounds for Divorce (Qī Chū 七出)

She is insubordinate to a parent-in-law.

(bú shùn fùmǔ 不顺父母 [不顺父母])

She fails to bear a son.

(wú zǐ 无子 [無子])

She is lewd and vulgar.

(yín pì 淫僻)

She draws unfavourable comment.

She is envious.

(jí wù 嫉妒)

She sows discord.

She is foully diseased.

(è jí 恶疾 [惡疾])

She does not perform her duties.

She is talkative.

(duō kǒu shé 多舌)

She reveals secrets to outsiders.

She is inclined to theft.

(qièdào 竊盜)

George Tan-One Hundred Chinese Customs

\*

They were driving to the airport. He'd bought her a ticket. The green jungle turned dark, melting into the black road. It was late in the day and the light was going away, they sped along past empty roadside stalls as the sun went down.

He sat staring straight ahead and he wouldn't look at her. She said nothing. She put her hand tentatively on his arm, he shrugged it off and shifted closer to the window and further away from her.

She pushed a folded paper with her phone number into his jacket pocket and she wondered if he'd throw it away.

She wanted to tell him how she loved his smile, but couldn't because he'd never believe her, but whenever he smiled at her it was as though god forgave her for being a mess.

Because she did not have the words she tried to catch his eye, willing him to risk drinking deeper of the dregs. But he only stared ahead, salt forming at the corners of his mouth.

\*

Some weeks later near the end of the Chinese year he found himself standing alone on a bridge over the Kinta River. He held the silver dragon in his arms, a dragon conceived in love one night and now unwanted. In a trance, he threw it into the river and watched the child they would never have float away. It sank into the brown river along with the Maotai and the dog's souls.

He wandered through the streets searching for the old house shop where he used to play mah-jong with Hoi Fat. It was still there, still open, still full of gamblers and whores. He sat and drank to cheer himself and he drank to forget, but his memories grew sharp and strong, wrapping around him pulling him under. He was drowning.

He peered through the thick dust that floated in streams through the air and saw an old man in the corner of the room with lucky hairy face moles. He was wearing a flowing red silk robe embroidered with golden dragons and three legged sun crows, like a melted red wax candle gleaming and lying in puddles around him.

Jin Yu felt a need to pour out his heart to this old wise Chinese man. He stumbled through the crowd, between stools and chairs, overturning tables to reach him.

He confessed:

'I've been dragged down by a bad women.'

The old man puffed on his pipe, his cheeks sunken and eyes like grit.

He told Jin Yu:

'Son you disappoint me, I knew you were a fool.'

He pointed his long bony finger at Jin Yu, his yellowed nail was thick and horny and ten inches long, and he said:

‘Did I ask you to come and whinge at me? Get lost!’

The old man bent away like a willow and blew dense golden smoke across the room covering all the drinkers and players in a blanket of heavy fog, and Jin Yu saw them slowly nod and sleep in peace, their heads on the tables, bodies laying over the bar, their arms around each other like a hundred children in a big old bed.

‘But I need your help,’ he was whining now, ‘I’m ruined. I miss the sound of her voice. It was like a rusty guitar string. She burnt my castle to the ground.’

The old man spat a big gob of shiny phlegm on the ground, he jeered:

‘If you live it up with a skinny slut, you’ll never live it down. So she left you son.’

He looked at Jin Yu his grit eyes shining flecks of granite. He laughed and blew Jin Yu against the wall with sweet acrid smoke.

Jin Yu called to him through the mist:

‘Her hair was like wind and I gave her a pearl and sapphire ring and she said she loved me.’

The old man cackled:

‘Listen idiot, everyone’s looking for someone to blame, the bars are full of men like you.’

He opened a silver tin and took out a sticky black ball of opium and refilled his pipe. He struck a match on his heel, it flashed and spat as flaming lumps of sulphur flew off through the air landing in dark shadows, still burning till they died in red glowing embers. He sucked like a baby sucking a nipple then passed Jin Yu the pipe.

‘She took me for a ride and I don’t want it to end. I cant forget her and I cant forgive her.’ Jin Yu gasped and pulled in a lungful of hot tarry smoke. He was burning up, his eyes watered and bean size drops of sweat cooled his brow.

‘Can it sucker!’ snapped the old man. ‘What did you expect? She’s a rider of men, the best damn jockey and you were the horse.’

He unfolded his arms, they were ten feet long and he snatched back his pipe. He scolded Jin Yu:

‘Enough, you’re a greedy whelp.’

‘She stuffs her handbag with the promises she makes, and then throws them away to make room for some more.’ Jin Yu heard himself whimpering far off and felt his insides soften. He looked at the old man and saw his father, his grandfather, and his ancestors. Filial love choked him up and he sank down wrapping his arms around the old man’s legs, resting his head.

‘Women are like that my son and you’ve been put out to pasture.’

He felt the old man pat his head like a dog.

‘She promised me she’d marry me.’ he whispered.

The old man jerked Jin Yu to his feet, his grit eyes bored into the very heart of him. He spat:

'Marry my arse!' Then he turned and floated out the door laughing a mouthful of black dental fillings.

As Jin Yu saw him go he called after him:

'I wanted to be the only one. I could have been Clyde.'

He gave in and called in the end. She asked how he was doing. He asked her how the weather was.

He told her, 'I'm dying Mandy.'

'What are you sure?' she asked.

I'm dying of a broken heart you stupid bitch, but he didn't say it, he only told her, 'I'm really dying for real.'

She said, 'I'm so sorry, I never knew you were ill.' And then she said, 'I'll come and visit you, if you want me to?'

If he wanted? She was the one who must want. He hated her.

'I'll be dead real soon, I'll be dead so soon there's no point in you taking a plane.'

'Very well, if you don't want me to come.'

She'd twisted the meaning; he'd never said he didn't want her. Why wouldn't she say it would kill her too if they couldn't be together.

'Mandy, my life is over.'

She never demanded to visit him, never begged him to let her return. She wondered if he were really ill or if this was the Chinese way to say their love affair was over forever and for good. It was so she needn't lose face. She would wait and see.

Jin Yu did not die and he never called her again. The years passed by and maybe he has many chubby sons with happy faces as round as moon cakes.

Yet sometimes late at night, or before dawn, when he's riding alone in the back seat of his Mercedes he knows he's forgotten nothing. Snaking along dark roads through dense green jungles her presence will be forever there beside him. A scent, a sigh, he closes his eyes and he can feel her lying across his legs, smell her perfume and cigarette smoke wafting around the car, waiting forever for her to tell him to stop the car.

Up the cold mountain is a steep rocky path,  
Where the white clouds rise, there are people and houses,  
Stop the carriage so I may sit down to enjoy the late autumn maples,  
Frosted leaves are more red than flowers in the Second Month.

远上寒山石径斜 白云生处有人家  
停车坐爱枫林晚 霜叶红于二月花

