

The Apostrophe

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The Hong Kong Writers Circle is a member organisation for writers of all levels and of all genres.

On an annual basis, the Hong Kong Writers Circle publishes an anthology of short stories. In this publication, The Apostrophe, the five points of the bauhinia flower (Hong Kong's emblem) are paralleled each quarter by exactly five original pieces, each of which has a connection to Hong Kong.

The Apostrophe is edited by members of the Hong Kong Writers Circle.

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Why Another Literary Magazine?

Editor's Note



Literary magazines don't make money. If anything, they lose money. Most are subsidized by free labor, and almost all require donations of some kind.

So why would Hong Kong—the world capital of capitalism—need one of these?

Since closing our first submissions window at midnight on 1 May 2023, we have seen exactly why: because there is so much more to show off. We have committed to publishing five exceptional pieces in each issue. We received far more excellent work than that.

It has also been enlightening to find out just how many connections there are between Hong Kong and the rest of the world.

The stories, essays, poems, and novel excerpts that we received include protagonists from Hong Kong, temporary visitors to Hong Kong, simple references to Hong Kong's food or natural features, and (yes!) businesspeople setting up international headquarters here—with branches everywhere from Shanghai to Mauritius.

The artwork and photography includes not only typical Hong Kong urban scenes, but also beautiful wildlife shots, intimate portraits of individuals, and inwardly-focused, abstract works.

These deserve to be seen. Hong Kong clearly has more to offer than an unbridled lust for business.

We hope you are looking forward to reading these pieces, and perhaps being inspired to contribute to the next issue.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

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Metamorphoses

Sonia FL Leung

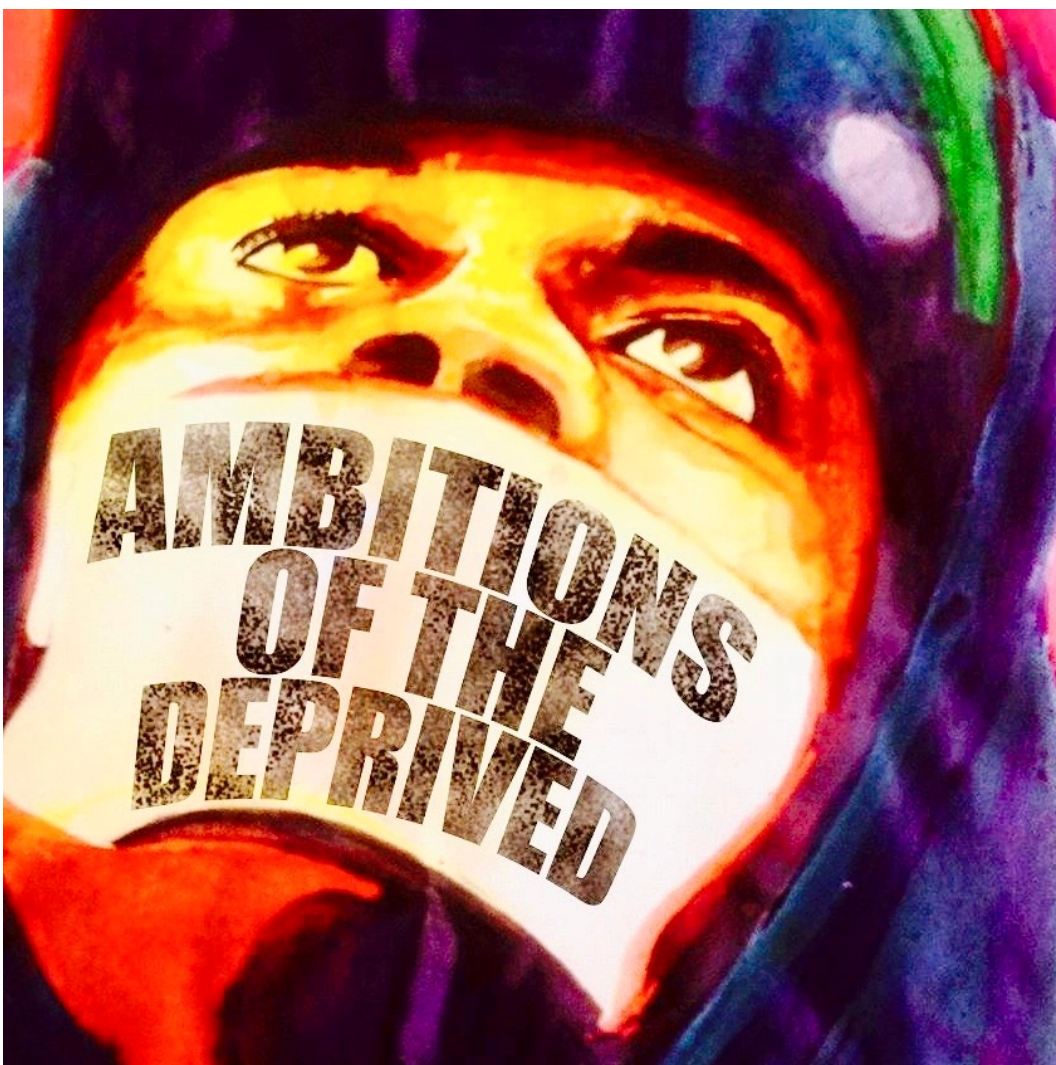


As a kite,
I fly against
not with the wind.

As squared clay,
I enter a kiln
and exit a tile.

As a garuda,
I spread my wings
and send my love into the universe.

As a dreamer,
I keep my innocence alive,
believing: Change is possible.



The Witch Hunter

Sam Powney

They look at me as if it's a trick. It is, of course; just not the one they imagine.

I repeat the question. "Be honest. Do you really like working here?" Then a pause, that essential pause, whose duration is mastered only with practice. "You won't lose your job if you say no. I promise."

My official title is "Efficiency Coordinator", but I know my true role. I'm a witch hunter.

There have been witch hunters as long as humans have been mistrustful. Of this I am certain. It took me a little while to recognise my calling, a first few months in which I clumsily tried to serve as one of Hong Kong's many human resources professionals, but the moment of recognition set me free. One day, my boss hinted that I should set myself a healthy target of redundancies. She did not say so outright, nothing so crude. She merely suggested we find some sort of quantifiable performance target ... and what other number could I possibly produce?

Even at that moment, the penny had not quite dropped. It still teetered on the precarious ledge of my remaining credulity.

I ventured a question: "What makes an employee disposable? Undesirable?"

She looked at me uncomfortably, but did her best to furnish a response. "I suppose it's if they are somehow unsuitable ... I mean ... you know ... a bad fit."

My frown lifted. “Thank you,” I said, “that makes things much clearer.”

I got up to leave. She was clearly relieved the conversation was over. We witch hunters are indispensable, but we are not popular.

Records of past witch hunters have been most useful to me. I have studied the career of Matthew Hopkins in the English Civil War, the Salem Trials, and the Zulu *sangoma*; but the most effective witch hunters, like myself, do not go by that name. For true mastery of the art, one must look to the careers of Jacques Hébert and Jean-Paul Marat in the French Revolution, forever unmasking treachery in their newspapers and offering up fresh victims for Madame Guillotine. Or one might turn to Senator Joe McCarthy, or the Red Guards, or the many other stripes of morality police. Nowadays, of course, one has only to visit Twitter to find innumerable denouncers, some of them very gifted craftsmen.

But, to return to my own area of witch hunting. How am I to judge the sheep from the goats? Truly lousy employees are rare; they are let go swiftly through the usual channels, and with no help from me. Rather, it is my job to winnow out inefficiency—a much more nebulous goal.

I have met some fellow witch hunters whose methodologies are frankly appalling. One openly admitted to me, “I fire the fat ones.” As you can probably imagine, though, we witch hunters generally try to avoid each other’s company. It’s unpleasant to see our mirror image and be reminded of our fundamentals. There’s no justification for what we do, and we all know it. In fact, it is precisely the illogic of our work which makes it sustainable. The idea that we ever find anything truly rotten is absurd—that would be to validate Matthew Hopkins and all his witch-dunking insanity. No, that won’t do at all—I’m not a monster. Still, I do need to have some people fired. Who? How to decide?

I said earlier that our profession is indispensable, and I believe it. Humans are fearful; communities need cohesion. We need reassurance that we are not being weakened, undermined, betrayed by bad actors. But who are the bad actors? It's difficult to say. Each of us has a unique character and is drawn to or repelled by different personalities—hence the familiar pantomime of office politics. Yet a small amputation every now and again can resolve our inherent factionalism, reassure us that what was once threatened is now restored. It doesn't really matter who the scapegoat is; there must simply be one.

Well enough for the community, but that still leaves me with a difficult choice. How am I, an ethical 21st century avocado eater, to decide who stays and who goes?

After that meeting with my boss, I vowed a policy of complete honesty, to myself and my colleagues. I would be truthful (though not transparent). The way forward was clear: I needed a question. One simple question to decide who is a fit, and who is not.

I build up with a series of other, trivial questions before I bring out the clincher.

Sometimes they come right out with it.

“No. I need the money.”

I would hug these souls—they are my kind of people—but a witch hunter must preserve his unemotional mystique. In any case, they have passed the test with flying colours.

Usually, they are more hesitant, more cagey. Very often, they lie. “Yes, I enjoy it here. I really feel part of the team.” Sometimes they use the word “exciting”, a dead giveaway. Some try

repeatedly to wriggle out of answering, as if the question wasn't clear. That only confirms my suspicion: they're okay.

But every so often—not very often, thank goodness, or I'd develop a fearful reputation—they answer with a simple, guileless “Yes.”

I look into their eyes. “You work at an insurance company, Douglas.” Always use their name at this point; their situation is grave. “There's no reason for you to love your job.”

“But I do.” The sheer simple heresy of it never fails to shock. I now know I am looking at a madman.

Sometimes, out of sheer pity, I try to throw them a lifeline. “Put it this way: if you had a trust fund and no family pressure, would you still be here, in your cubicle?”

Sadly, they only ever give one of two answers, both wrong: “I would,” or, worse, “I am.”

I smile and thank them for their time, but their time is up. They are not like the rest of us. They do not fit here, and I have sniffed them out.

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The Head of a Chicken

Murli Melwani



“What is the purpose of your visit?”

I thought for a moment. The Immigration Officer looked, unblinking, into my eyes. “To visit my uncle, sir.”

“What does your uncle do?”

“He owns a tailoring shop, sir.”

“You’re going to work for him?”

“No, sir.”

The officer signaled to a colleague who had been pacing behind the Immigration kiosks. He walked over briskly, took my passport, and gestured for me to follow him.

He made me stand outside a room behind the kiosks. What were they going to do to me? I had done nothing wrong. I hadn't even spoken rudely.

I hoped they wouldn't send me back. My mother had sacrificed a lot to put together the money for my ticket.

The door of the interrogation room opened. A Filipina woman came out sobbing, accompanied by an officer.

A tall Chinese officer craned his neck and asked me to enter. He told me to sit on a narrow chair across from him. He scratched at a fiery rash on his forehead as he flicked through the pages of my passport.

"You never travel before?"

"No, sir."

"Why have you come to Hong Kong?"

"To visit my uncle, sir."

"Your uncle. Does he have a business?" Scratch, scratch. "You'll work for him?"

"No sir." Ram *maama*, my uncle, had written my mother and told her that no matter how often they asked whether I had come to Hong Kong to work, I should say "no." Indians, as part of the British Commonwealth, do not need a visa to enter Hong Kong, and many use this privilege to enter and stay on illegally.

"Then why did you spend so much money to come here?"

I had come off a long flight, and hadn't been able to sleep on the plane. My head was heavy. I was getting nervous. And the officer had taken my return ticket.

Scratch forehead. Flick through passport.

“Sir, I’ve come to visit my uncle.” I could sense the pleading strain in my voice.

“I will give you thirty-day visa. Go back by thirty days.”

“Thank you—thank you, sir, so much.”

I was relieved to see my uncle in the crowd outside the arrival gate.

“I have been here an hour and a half,” Ram *maama* said testily.

Mother had told me not to talk back to him.

“With all this trouble, they should have sent you back.”

I saw people getting into taxis, and began moving toward the taxi stand.

“Where are you going? You think I have money to throw.”

He led me to a bus stand. Couldn’t he see that I was dragging a heavy bag? Mother had packed a lot of home-cooked food, clothes, shoes, and all sorts of junk for Ram *maama*, Parvati *maamee*, and their children. All to please him, so that he would treat me with some consideration.

“Best quality shirts and pants. Cheapest price,” I shouted at the top of my voice, pushing fliers on passersby, who ignored me. At least take a flier from me, I pleaded silently. My shirt, clammy, clung to my body.

“What, you don’t know how to give out pamphlets?” Ram *maama* said, an expression of shock on his face. “Where did you stand?”

“On the steps outside.” Ram *maama*’s store was on the third floor of Chung King Mansion, and I thought that people entering the shopping complex would be the best catch.

“You stone-head. Every restaurant, grocer, and watch hawker stands on those steps. How did you expect people to notice you? Go out in the streets.”

I was eighteen when my father passed away.

“*Beta*, son,” my mother had said, shortly after his death. “There is only so much I can earn.” Her source of income was from the jars of pickled fruits and vegetables she sold to residents in the buildings neighboring our apartments. “You are the oldest.”

She didn’t have to say anything more. My two brothers and three sisters could not live on her income alone, and so it fell to me to leave school to help support the family.

My mother found me a job in a shoe store in Worli, and the money I brought in was barely enough to sustain the household. She kept writing to Ram *maama* to try to get me a better job with him. She promised that I’d work like a son to help him in his business.

Son? Ram *maama* treated me worse than a servant.

“Keep looking in classifieds in the newspaper,” he would tell me almost daily. “Every business in Hong Kong needs workers. Get anything. Move out of my home.” Once he paused, then hissed, “Just vanish.”

Hong Kong, with its colorful signs in Chinese characters, should have been an enjoyable experience for a twenty-one year old. But how could I like a place where I was not wanted?

On the third day after my arrival, I stood outside Ram *maama's* eight-foot-square, hole-in-the-wall shop. Ram *maama* went home for dinner at 8pm and returned at 9pm. We kept the shop open past midnight, since tourists stayed out late. He told me that when he left for dinner, I should not plop down on a chair and watch people passing by; I was to stand at the entrance and shout, "Best quality shirts and pants. Cheapest price."

When I saw a boy from my community pass by, a Sindhi about my age, I stopped him.

"I don't know whether I should ask you this question," I said. "I want to get a job—any job."

"I did what you did for weeks. I know you must feel like a pimp. I put an ad in the classifieds."

I didn't know how much that would cost. I was careful with the money my mother had given me; I wouldn't know what to do if it ran out.

"Make it a point to say you will work long hours. Also say you will accept the offered salary. I'm Shiv Harwani. Phone me if you want more information, but do it between 1 and 2pm. That's when Boss is away for lunch." He gave me his card. The card read *Speciality Exporters*.

A few days after I placed the advertisement—with Ram *maama's* knowledge, and to his relief—I received a call from a Mr. Chandru Tejawani, asking me to come for an interview at the Holiday Inn hotel.

Shiv Harwani had been a god in disguise for me.

Mr. Chandru Tejawani, an Indian, and Sindhi like me, was tall, trim, and well-maintained. He spoke in a soft voice and smiled a lot. His rimless glasses gave him a professorial look. He asked

about my schooling, about my prior stint in a shoe store, and why I wanted to leave my uncle so soon.

“There is no future working in a tailoring store.”

“An ambitious young man,” Mr. Tejwani said with an approving smile. “If a friend were to ask you what markets your company ships to, what would be your answer?”

I thought for a moment. “I’d say I’m new in the company and I’m still learning.”

“Suppose this friend were to ask you the same question a year later?”

Mr. Tejwani was testing either my loyalty or maturity. I had to cover all my bases.

“I’d smile and not say anything.”

“How would that help?”

“The friend would know that I did not want to answer his question.”

“Suppose he was asking you for the sake of conversation.”

“Excuse me, sir, for saying this, but a Sindhi would not ask without a motive.”

“What would be his motive?”

“To try and open a new market for his own company. Sindhis go where other Sindhis have succeeded.”

Mr. Tejwani’s office, an export house, was located in Taiwan. I would be an Export Executive.

“We export garments and sundries,” Mr. Tejjwani had explained. “*Sundries* is a general term that covers anything that might be needed in a household. Your job will be to contact factories, and collect samples and catalogs.”

That didn’t seem too hard.

“Once you become familiar with the items we handle, you’ll be sent to the markets—all overseas—to book orders. When you return, you’ll have to place the orders with the factories. When the goods are ready, you’ll go to the factories for quality inspections.”

“I’m ready to learn, sir,” I said.

“Good. Also, you’ll have to travel to our markets a number of times throughout the year. Any questions?”

“No sir.”

My monthly salary would be the equivalent of \$300, plus a meal allowance of \$300. I’d be housed in an apartment with the two other Sindhi staff. My hours would be long. While the Taiwanese staff worked from 9am to 6pm, the Sindhi staff were expected to finish the day’s work. In his experience, Mr. Tejjwani said, this never went later than 8pm.

The contract was for two years. The company would arrange my Taiwan visa. I would also be given a month’s leave, and a round-trip ticket to India to visit my family at the end of the contract term. It would be a one-way ticket if my contract was not to be extended.

I could have kissed Mr. Chandru Tejjwani’s feet for this act alone. It meant that I could live without fear of being deported for two years.

He asked me to return the next morning, and handed me a round-trip ticket to Taipei. He accompanied me to the Taiwan consulate to help me apply for a visa.

On the flight from Hong Kong to Taipei, I tried to think of every question the Immigration Officer could possibly ask me. *What did you do during your time in Hong Kong? How much money are you carrying? What is your job in Taipei?*

When I finally reached the airport, I felt fully prepared with a response to any question the officer would ask me. I was greeted by a blue-uniformed officer, who brusquely requested my identification. He looked through my passport, looked up once to see whether my photo matched my face, stamped the disembarkation card, stapled the yellow duplicate in the passport, and slid the whole thing forward.

The welcome was complete when I found someone who looked to be a year or two older than me holding up a sheet of paper inscribed with my name, Vivek Ajwani. I nodded at him.

“My name is Ashok Dalwani. Follow me.”

We took a bus to the city. Ashok and I talked on the forty-five minute drive. He was one of the two Sindhis who worked for Mr. Tejwani. The other was Vinod Gurnani. Our staff quarters consisted of a spacious three-bedroom apartment, but everything in Taipei was spacious compared with Hong Kong. I learnt that Ashok and Vinod had the same contract I did. The bus dropped us at a city bus stop on Chung Shan North Road. We walked a few yards to our office—Forever Fortune Trading Company, Ltd.

“Strange name for a company,” I said.

“The boss is a little superstitious,” Ashok said. “He consulted a Chinese astrologer, and the astrologer gave him a choice of three names. He chose this one.”

I scanned my surroundings as we entered the building; the office was rectangular in shape, and a narrow passage divided six tables. The reception area consisted of a sofa set and a table at the entrance.

Two Taiwanese secretaries sat behind the desks in front. A darkish man with hair falling over his brow, who I guessed was Vinod, sat at a desk behind one of the secretaries. He looked up, caught my eye, gave me a fleeting smile, and continued typing on a calculator. Ashok pointed to a glass door on the right and took his seat across the narrow aisle from Vinod.

On the door was a plaque with a few Chinese characters, which, I later learned, translated as “boss.” I knocked, and an impeccable Mr. Tejwani opened the door.

“I hope you had a good flight,” he said, smiling broadly and holding out his hand. I tried to imagine my *maama* welcoming me with such warmth. Or any Indian boss, for that matter.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Tejwani placed me behind Ashok and in front of another Taiwanese staff member, who appeared to be the manager.

Wasting no time, Mr. Tejwani explained the intricacies of Forever Fortune. Most buyers wanted to know the delivered-in-the-warehouse cost of the goods they ordered. It was important for the exporter to give him prices that included cost, insurance, and freight—what I would come to know as CIF. He taught me how to calculate CIF prices. Then, as a test, he gave me the price lists for a number of factories, with packing details and cubic measurements, and told me to calculate CIF prices for various ports.

Once I had acquired a fair degree of proficiency, he called me into his office, took out a sheet of paper, and drew a circle in the center of the page. Then he drew smaller circles, like a constellation, around the orb in the center

“Forever Fortune is the circle in the center. The one in the left corner is the buyer. The circle next to him is his bank.” He moved clockwise, filling in the circles with the words, *buyer’s custom broker, shipping company, insurance company, our bank, our custom broker, and factory.*

He then drew lines to connect the smaller circles to Forever Fortune in the center.

In half an hour, I learned more about the interconnectedness of all the various service institutions from his overview of international trade than I would have learned in a year at college.

Mr. Tejwani’s manner was quiet and understanding. He seemed more like a teacher than a businessman. A kind teacher, because he allowed me my mistakes, and was patient when I did not grasp something the first time around.

Mr. Tejwani was so unlike most Sindhi, who live and dream business. Whenever he had a free moment, he opened a book and became lost in it. He left the office exactly at six every day, whereas most other bosses stayed on until eight. After work, Mr. Tejwani drove to the American Club in China to swim. ACC membership was open only to expatriates. On Friday evenings, his wife and two daughters joined him. On Thursdays and Sundays, he attended the *bhajan* session in the small temple run by the Indians’ Association of Taipei, and would occasionally sing a *bhajan*, a spiritual song.

After three months, Mr. Tejwani asked me to accompany him to a factory on the outskirts of a city named Changhua, in South

Taiwan, to check the goods and make sure they were made to specification.

During the three-hour ride in the luxury coach, we talked without the usual formality between a boss and employee.

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?” he asked me.

“Two brothers and three sisters.”

“So, as the eldest, you have come overseas to help the family.”

“Yes sir.”

After a few minutes, Mr. Tejwani smiled impishly. “What was your favorite book in school?”

I hesitated. “*Aesop’s Fables*.”

Mr. Tejwani guffawed. “Are you serious?” He withdrew a book from his briefcase. It was Philip Roth’s *Deception*.

A little later he asked whether I liked Taiwan.

“I like any country that gives me a proper visa.” The nature of my visa was such that I had to fly to Hong Kong every two months to renew it.

A lot of passengers dozed off even though the volume of the TV, which was showing a Taiwanese soap, was deafening. I became fascinated by what I could see of the countryside through the window: water-logged paddy fields reflected cloud formations; boats shaped like swans—a tourist attraction—glided across a lake; villagers sold vegetables in a township just a single street long.

The townships grew bigger as we approached Changhua. A huge granite Buddha was seated in the lotus position atop a hill.

“The statue is twenty-eight feet high,” Mr. Tejwani said, as though he had read my mind.

The streets narrowed and the coach slowed as it wove its way through cars parked alongside a brick-colored temple with a graceful, upward-sloping roof.

“One of the oldest Confucian temples in Taiwan,” he said.

As the coach pulled into the terminal, which was really a huge parking lot built around a circular brick ticket office, a man in a parrot-green T-shirt waved his arms at us.

“That’s Mr. Lin. He always picks me up.”

“*Nĩ hảo*,” Mr. Lin said, smiling through red, betel-stained teeth.

A Chinese girl with oversized glasses stood behind Mr. Lin. “I am Miss Shi. Mr. Lin says welcome to Changhua, to Boss Teja-wani and his assistant.” Miss Shi was obviously the interpreter. “My boss says we go for lunch before going to factory.”

Lunch was a lengthy affair that included a succession of dishes. Mr. Lin downed shots of *Kaoliang* wine, urging us to join him, and Mr. Tejwani politely declined every time. Miss Shi described each dish as it was brought in.

Afterward, we rode in Mr. Lin’s Mercedes to the factory. The factory was a squat, three-story building with unpainted, gray concrete walls. A sign atop the building read: *Elegant Shirt Manufactory Ltd.*

“Mr. Lin says that we first go to warehouse,” Miss Shi explained. “We see the packed cartons and you choose the cartons. We will open them for your inspection.”

In the factory, we passed rows of whirring sewing machines, the women behind them intently feeding fabric to the stitch-plate. Not one of them looked up as we passed.

Cartons with yellow straps lined three sides of the warehouse. A counter twice the size of a billiard table stood close to the entrance.

Mr. Lin gestured, directing us to the cartons, then took out a roll of betel leaf and stuffed it in his mouth.

Mr. Tejwani looked up at the stacked cartons. “It is not physically possible to check all 960 cartons.” He directed his instruction toward me. “We have to pick, at random, one carton per color and one carton per size—a maximum of twenty-four cartons.

At Mr. Tejwani’s direction, the two workers who followed us into the warehouse brought down a series of cartons, lining them against the table. They started clipping the straps and lancing through the tape that sealed the boxes. Mr. Lin stood close to the table. His face tensed.

Mr. Tejwani unpacked a shirt, laid it on the table, and removed a measuring tape from his briefcase. He stretched the tape down the front of the shirt, then across the length of the sleeves and the width of the chest. After matching the results with our order sheet, he examined the stitching round the button holes, and the interior label with the care instructions.

“Size M is fine. Vivek, check the XLs, Ls, and Ss against our order sheet.”

I was nervous. I ran the tape twice where Mr. Tejwani had only measured once.

“Check whether the colors are assorted correctly in each carton,” he said.

We found that the goods had been made to our specifications.

“Miss Shi,” Mr. Tejwani said, “please tell Mr. Lin that the goods are fine. Please ship them out.”

Mr. Lin smiled and said a few words to Miss Shi.

“Mr. Lin says thank you. He says thank you very much.”

“Does Mr. Lin make anything else?” I asked my boss.

“No. He specializes in shirts.”

“May I ask what happens when we don’t inspect goods?” I asked.

“Good question. The factory can ship what it likes. If the goods are not right, the buyer will slap us with a claim. The claim can be anything from ten percent to 100 percent. In the import-export trade, honoring a claim is established international practice.”

Our business concluded, Mr. Lin and Miss Shi drove us to the terminal.

Mr. Tejwani called me to his office one afternoon and motioned me to sit.

“You’ve gone on a number of inspections. You’ve become familiar with what we sell. Do you think you are ready to go overseas and book orders?”

“I’m ready, sir.” I leaned back in the chair. This was the chance I’d been waiting for.

Mr. Tejwani always sent his raw recruits to the island of Mauritius. Forever Fortune had a good agent in Mauritius, and the clients were not demanding.

Mr. Tejwani called Ashok and Vinod into the office.

“Make a list of the items we ship to Mauritius. And the factories we buy them from. Vivek, after they give you the list, call up the factories. Tell them that you’ll leave on a trip shortly. Ask them to send you their current catalogs and new samples. You can always ask me if you have any questions.”

“I will, sir.”

As I recorded and cataloged samples for the customers, Mr. Tejwani went over the best ways to read a customer’s needs, and briefed me on any number of minor details. On the flight to Mauritius, I went over all Mr. Tejwani had taught me. Oscillating between worry and confidence, my thoughts jumped from concern for my family in India to focusing on the person that Mr. Tejwani was beginning to draw out from me.

As the plane descended, the calm blue waters surrounding Mauritius had a soothing effect on me. The feeling of serenity would carry me throughout the day.

Forever Fortune’s agent, Mr. Mohamed Ahmed, received me at the airport, drove me to the hotel to check in, then brought me to his office.

He introduced me to his secretary, Ms. Nasima, then began speaking to her in French. I was surprised to hear ethnic Indians conversing in this language, but I soon learned that French was the *lingua franca* in Mauritius.

“Mr. Vivek, please show me your samples. This will help Miss Nasima to set up appointments for you.” Mr. Ahmed spoke in a soft voice, and a missing lower tooth drew attention to itself whenever he opened his mouth.

The next morning, Mr. Ahmed drove me to see one of his clients, Sukhlal et Fils. Mr. Ahmed sat at Mr. Sukhlal’s table, while Mr.

Sukhlal's two sons spread my samples over the counters. They would pick up an item, say something in French, and either set it aside or toss it into my bag. After they had made their selections, Mr. Sukhlal said something to Mr. Ahmed.

"Mr. Vivek, they will give you the quantities they need for the items they have selected. You have to quote them your lowest CIF price."

"I will quote them for the items I have prices for," I explained. "I'll have to fax my office for the prices that I don't have. I'll have these to you by tomorrow morning."

Next, Mr. Ahmed took us to the home of Pierre et Fils. Mr. Pierre was an elderly man of mixed race, with a thatch of white hair. I opened my bag and laid out the samples before Mr. Pierre. He asked the price of each item he picked up.

His response was the same to almost everything: *C'est trop cher*. When I had become certain that Mr. Pierre would not order anything, he set a few samples aside and said something to Mr. Ahmed.

"Mr. Vivek, he's going to make you offers against your prices. He wants you to fax his offers to your boss."

Mr. Pierre said something, his hair quivering as though it had a life of its own.

"He says to add the words in your fax, *Monsieur Pierre wants you to negotiate hard with your supplier. You get him the prices and you'll have yourself an order.*" Mr. Pierre nodded his head as Mr. Ahmed translated.

The next morning, Mr. Ahmed waited for me at the hotel to take me back to his office, where faxes from Mr. Tejwani awaited my inspection. I booked an order with Sukhlal et Fils, but Mr. Tejwani could not match Mr. Pierre's prices. And so it went over

the next few days, with one order here, no order there, until it was time for my return to Taiwan.

In the hotel before my flight was to leave, I couldn't resist tallying up my orders. As it happened, I would be leaving Mauritius with a sheaf of orders running into six figures.

Vinod raised his head, looking at me curiously as I walked into the office the next day. "You look like one of those Bollywood heroes who's just karated six goons," he said. "I guess you have done well."

"No, no, Mr. Chen. I can't accept that shipment date. You have to ship it two weeks earlier." I heard authority in my voice as I placed orders with the factories.

On to the next call. "The client wants nine colors in the baby's jumper set. I can't accept six colors, Mr. Ho."

"If you want nine colors, you have to increase quantity or increase price," Mr. Ho said.

"Mr. Ho, this is not a one-time deal. The nine colors will help our client sell the item fast. The faster he sells, the sooner you'll get a repeat order."

The Taiwanese staff helped translate for me when a factory owner did not speak English. Miss Huang prepared and placed orders. Mr. Gin attended to enquiries. The manager, Miss Lee, looked after the shipping formalities and the documentation.

If I had called Shiv Harwani my god, Mr. Tejwani was my guru. Apart from teaching me a whole new trade, he had given me the tools I needed to develop confidence in my abilities.

A few days after my return, Vinod left for Africa and Ashok headed to South America. Every now and then, I'd shoot off to Mauritius.

Two years passed quickly, and I was given a month's holiday to visit my mother. When I returned, I found that Mr. Tejwani had arranged a visa that did not require me to leave Taiwan every two months. I could have kissed his feet.

I took bus 220, which left around 7pm from Chung Shan North Road to the apartment in Tienmou. On most evenings, a girl with glasses and a large handbag was on the bus when I boarded. One day she smiled at me. I nodded and smiled back. This became a daily routine.

On an impulse one evening, I got off at her stop.

I said hello and stuck out my hand. My Tejwani-shaped persona had vanquished the uncertain youth who had emigrated from India two years ago.

"My name is Vivek. What is yours?"

"I'm June Yu." June's brownish hair was parted on the left. She was unlike other Chinese girls in two respects: she had a double eyelid crease, and was full in the body, though not fat. I had never seen her in a dress or skirt; she usually wore pastel slacks with a floral top.

"Lovely name. Where do you work?"

"I work for a company on Nanking East Road. We make ABS molds for cars."

"I'm in trading myself. Our buyers are in Africa, South America, and other places."

“Our buyers are large Japanese manufacturers,” she said.

June spoke English well; I could not say the same was true for our staff and most of the others who worked in our building.

We began to meet every day. We would walk slowly through the narrow lanes to a complex of apartment buildings between Shir Dong Lu and Ter Shing Tung Lu. One day, I held her hand, and it went on like this for a few weeks. Finally, I stopped to look her in the eye. When I kissed her for the first time, she responded with passion.

Since, at any given time, one or both of my roommates were traveling overseas, the third person had the run of the staff apartment. I brought June to the apartment on most evenings.

In the month of December, nobody traveled; the clients were busy with their Christmas and New Year’s sales. One afternoon, Ms. Tu, the new secretary, asked Ashok, Vinod, and me to stay after hours.

After Miss Huang left, Ms. Tu latched the office door from inside.

“Listen to me,” she said in a low voice. “Forever Fortune is making good profits. Who’s working hard to make this money? You three boys, and us Chinese staff.”

I wondered where she was going with this.

“The boss has stopped traveling. All he does is make a few phone calls now and then—to the agents, the buyers, and the banks.”

“But that is what bosses do,” I said.

“*Ayi-yaa*. You don’t understand. Let him continue to make the phone calls. We should share the profits.”

“How can we do that?” Ashok scratched his chin.

“Very simple, *lah*. I’ve spoken to a number of factories. I told them, ‘Keep three percent commission for every order we give you.’”

Vinod cut in. “Have the factories agreed?”

“Why wouldn’t they agree? If they keep three percent for us, they can keep one or two percent extra for themselves. They make more money.”

“Why don’t we go to Mr. Tejawani and ask him to give us a raise?” I said.

“Oh, the *laopan*, the boss, will say, ‘You have your contracts.’”

“Let us try to approach him anyway,” I said. Vinod and Ashok maintained a studied silence.

“*Ayi-yaa*. He will say, ‘When the contract is over, I’ll consider.’ Bosses always say that. Then when the time comes, they say this and that, business is slow, customers not paying our bills, hundred reasons.”

“I don’t think Mr. Tejawani will say that. He is a kind man.” I meant it.

“Veevaka, you are a simple man. If we lose this opportunity, next time factories will think we are not serious. They will not even listen us, *lah*.”

“Have you spoken to the other girls?” Ashok continued scratching his chin.

“I have spoken to Miss Lee. I’m not so sure about Miss Huang. She has an upside down brain. I don’t know what she will reply. Maybe she will tell the *laopan* about our plan.”

Ashok, Vinod, and I conferred, speaking to each other in the Sindhi language. We agreed that Mr. Tejwani was a good man who treated us well. Should we join Miss Tu’s scheme?

“But he does not pay us as well as other Indian companies,” Vinod pointed out.

“Getting a job elsewhere would be difficult,” I said.

“Not with our experience.” This from Vinod.

“Give me one day to think about it,” I said.

Miss Tu jumped in, angry. “You have to decide now. If you tell ‘Yes’ tomorrow, we’ll say ‘Sorry.’”

It all came down to money. It was true that Mr. Tejwani had helped me, but I had also done my bit, working hard and bringing him business.

After conferring again in Sindhi, Ashok, Vinod, and I agreed we would take part in Miss Tu’s scheme.

The commission we earned under the table came to about five hundred dollars a month for each of us.

The advantage to us became a liability for the company. Because of our built-in commission, the prices we quoted the buyers were higher than those of our competitors. And as a result, we began to lose orders.

Six months later, Mr. Tejwani opened the door to his office.

“I’d like to talk to all of you for a short time,” he announced. “Please don’t take any phone calls.”

Mr. Tejwani did this rarely—it was his way of calling a meeting.

Papers were placed on desks and the clack of typing slowed to silence. “We get a lot of enquiries. But these have not materialized into orders.”

Everyone was quiet.

“Do you negotiate hard with the factories?” he asked no one in particular.

No response. Miss Tu doodled a flower on her worksheet.

“I suppose I’m to blame. It’s true, I haven’t phoned our customers in a long time. I used to call them at least once a month to chat and ask how business is going. Then I’d slip in, ‘Check your inventory. If you need anything, shoot me a fax.’”

Mr. Tejwani pushed back his glasses and walked up and down the length of the office.

“Out of sight, out of mind, I guess,” he said in a monotone.

“After all, bosses relate better to bosses,” he continued. I noticed a smirk on Ms. Tu’s face, but she covered it quickly enough.

“I guess I have to hit the road again. One is never too old to begin again.”

Mr. Tejwani went first to South America. He sent us enquires. We faxed back prices. He faxed back and said these were not workable. “Our competitors are offering about five percent cheaper for the same brands, the same products,” he wrote on each of his faxes.

The story was the same on his trip to the African markets.

Ditto the other markets.

On his return, he invited the factory bosses and managers to lunch in an expensive restaurant, and explained his situation. But Miss Tu had alerted the factory owners to the reason for the invitation.

After the usual parade of dishes, we were sipping green tea when he said, “Friends, I’ve been doing business with you for many years. But recently, I’ve found that my competitors are able to supply the same goods at a much cheaper price.”

A few factory owners busied themselves with sipping their tea.

“I can’t understand it. May I request that the next time we send you enquiries, you talk to your suppliers, the raw material suppliers, and get better prices?”

Mr. Jong, who manufactured ladies and men’s underwear, and who could speak some English, made a show of looking for his glasses, then put them on and said, “You are old and respected customer. We quoting same prices to you and other exporters.”

“I believe you, Mr. Jong. But my customers have shown me the faxes, quotations from other Taiwan exporters.”

Mr. Jong initiated a discussion in Chinese with the factory owners at the table.

“Mr. Teja-wani. We think other exporters keeping smaller profit. Maybe you also should reduce your profit margin.”

Mr. Tejwani, being the trusting man he was, believed the factory owners. He took their advice. But instead of continuing to go on trips himself, he sent us out: this is where he made a mistake. His loss was our gain.

Vinod was the first to set out.

I was happy I was not chosen. More and more, I hated spending time away from June and she hoped I'd never have to travel. Lately, she'd been asking me to get a desk job in Taipei.

The office needed about three weeks to prepare samples and catalogs for Vinod's trip, so June and I used that time to set a plan of our own in motion.

Govind Parnani, another exporter in Taipei, had a reputation for trying to contact the salespeople of other Sindhi companies, with the sole purpose of finding out the names of his competitors' buyers in various markets. Ashok, Vinod, and I planned to approach him, and tell him we would pass the orders we booked for Forever Fortune on to him. Govind Parnani liked the idea, and why shouldn't he? We would share our profits with him, and he was getting orders without having to foot the bill for our airfare and hotel.

In this arrangement with Govind Parnani, we left out the Chinese staff of Forever Fortune.

On Vinod's return, we passed on two thirds of the orders to Govind Parnani. Mr. Tejwani was surprised at the paltry orders Vinod had booked. He made a quick calculation: the trip had barely covered Vinod's airfare and hotel expenses. Profit there was none.

The arrangement with Govind Parnani worked well.

June was privy to all that went on at Forever Fortune.

"Vivek," June said one Sunday as we walked hand in hand through Tienmou Park, "how can you trust this Parnani?"

“We get a cut without the expenses of an office. Gravy on top,” I said.

“What guarantee do you have that he won’t enter your markets and snatch away your clients?”

“No guarantee. We made the deal on a handshake.”

“You have given him all the information about the clients on a platter.”

June had a point.

“Yes.” I thought for a moment. “He can ask for a bigger slice of the pie.”

“Or he could expose you or report you to your boss.”

“True,” I said. “There are many ways he can twist our arms.”

I had made up my mind to marry June. June understood export procedures. She told me that her parents would help finance me if I set up independently. The biggest advantage of the arrangement was that I could get a permanent resident visa, as the husband of a Taiwanese citizen.

I began to feel the thrill of the well-known Chinese saying: “It is better to be the head of a chicken than the tail of an ox.”

June resigned from her job. We rented a small office in one of the suburbs of Taipei, far away from Forever Fortune. She applied for and followed up on the various licenses that were needed to set up an export company. I did not tell Vinod, Ashok, Miss Tu, or Miss Lee about my plan.

Shortly after Vinod and Ashok returned from their trips, Mr. Tejwani sent me on a South American tour. This was the

opportunity I'd been waiting for. On the very day I landed in Chile, I sent Mr. Tejwani a fax informing him I was resigning. All I stood to lose was the current month's salary. The Travelers Cheques Mr. Tejwani had given me were enough to see me through the rest of my trip.

I did feel sorry for Mr. Tejwani. He had done a lot for me. But in the end, one has to put one's own interest before that of another, no matter how good the other has been.

On my return to Taipei, I executed the orders I had booked through my own company. "My own company"—that sounded nice. The banks deposited the proceeds of the letters of credit into my account as soon as I submitted the export documents. I saw how easy it was to become rich. I was happy I had taken the plunge.

I phoned my mother to tell her the news.

"Ma, Ma. You're not going to believe this. I don't work for anybody."

"What! Have you lost your job?" A quaver entered my mother's voice.

"No, Ma. I've become my own boss. I've opened my own company."

My mother started crying.

"You should be happy, Ma."

"I am. I am." She paused, then said, "Your father would have been so proud of you."

"I'll send you more money than what I'm sending now. Also, you can ask me for more if you need it."

The next day, I wrote to tell my mother that I was in love with a Chinese girl and would be marrying her. I had a reason for relaying this news by letter—I wanted to prepare her, give her time to accept my decision before I called her again.

I phoned a few days later.

“Ma, did you get my letter?”

A curt “yes” was her only response.

I was quiet. I’d hoped she would ask me questions about June. For a while, the static on the line was the only sound.

“Ma, give me your blessings.”

A pause. Then: “I will imagine that I have four daughters instead of three. A daughter leaves her home, her parents.”

“That’s what I’d like for my wedding,” June said, pointing to a couple posing for a photographer. They stood on the steps of the picturesque Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall. It was Saturday; we had come to see the ritual changing of the guards. “I want an album of our photos.”

It had become fashionable for young couples in Taipei to be photographed in romantic poses against various landmarks. Each photograph entailed an expensive change of costume, and the professionals who shot these photos charged an arm and a leg. But the strange thing was that the album did not carry a single picture of the wedding ceremony or the banquet.

“Who looks at an album after the first three months?” I said.

“Vivek, no marriage is complete without an album.”

June wanted to experience the fashion and the tradition, the farce and drama, of a contemporary Chinese wedding. I'd hoped that our wedding would be a brief ceremony in a court, but I decided not to share my opinion with her.

"We'll choose the best venue for the ceremony—we'll hold the banquet at the most expensive hotel!"

June's parents were financing my business, so it would appear magnanimous to her if I spent all my savings on the arrangements.

"June, I'll give you my check book. Spend as much as you like."

"I'll wear a white dress with lace when I enter the banquet hall. Then, midway, when we have to go from table to table greeting the guests, I'll change into a pink sleeveless gown. Later, when it's time for us to stand at the door to say goodbye to the guests, I'll wear red." I was aware of the Chinese custom of the bride changing three dresses during the banquet. Had money become such an obsession that I kept a mental count of the expenses?

The reception was held in the ballroom of the Grand Hotel. Its architecture mimicked that of a Chinese palace, with its huge lobby and friezes of scenes from Chinese history adorning the walls. There were over eighty guests in attendance. The dishes kept coming, the liquor flowed, and the decibels kept rising.

I worked hard. I'd return from a trip only to prepare for the next. I had no fear that in my absence, my staff would do what Vinod, Ashok, and I had done to Mr. Tejwani. June was also an unbelievable negotiator, and got us prices that increased our profits by three or four percent. The overall margin worked out to a whopping twelve or thirteen percent. I would advise any foreigner who wishes to make money in the export business to marry a Chinese woman.

I had learned a while ago that Hong Kong exporters had access to far more sources of supply than did exporters from other countries. After all, what didn't China make?

Money was coming in hand over fist. I grabbed opportunities when they came my way. And June remained my best consultant. "Yes, Hong Kong is better for business than Taiwan," she said. "But I don't want to move there."

"Why not?"

"My friends are here. My family is here."

"Your brother has graduated. Why should he work for someone else? We can expand. Talk to your family about it."

She conceded, and her parents liked the idea. But it was June's mother who finally convinced her that the move was in everyone's best interest.

If Hong Kong were ever to have a statue over its harbor, it would be a Chinese fairy, her hands clutching dollar bills, opening her arms to all comers. Indeed, you can bring in as much money as you want and take out any amount, no questions asked.

The move to Hong Kong was easy. June picked up Cantonese in no time, although she spoke it with a Taiwanese accent.

I became a sort of yo-yo between my markets and Hong Kong. I was hardly in the city a week before I took off again.

Money created a taste for more money.

When June became pregnant, her father, Mr. Yu, came in for part of the day to help out. But in no time, the excitement of the

office got to him, and he involved himself in helping out with the company. Since Jay, my brother-in-law, also worked in the office, there were no Miss Tus or Miss Lees to cut deals with factories. I felt free to expand as quickly as I liked.

Our first child was a daughter; June named her May Hua.

Since I was on the road most of the time, I did not see my daughter grow up. I tried to make it up by telling June to send her to the best school in Hong Kong—after all, we had the money.

One day, as I was walking to lunch along the poorly named Lyndhurst Terrace (which was actually quite a narrow street in Hong Kong), who should I run into but Ashok. Grey peppered his mustache, and his hair was thinning.

I took him to a classy Thai restaurant across from the HSBC building, and he filled me in on what happened after I'd resigned from Forever Fortune.

"Mr. Tejwani was subdued for a few days," Ashok said. "We couldn't tell whether he was angry or upset. He tried to contact your *maama*, Ram. Your *maama* told him that he was lucky you were off his hands."

How should I see Mr. Tejwani? As a decent man who took bad luck in his stride, or as a trusting fool, who did not know that the darkest shadow was under the lamp?

Ashok described how, seven or eight months after I'd left, Mr. Tejwani walked into the Forever Fortune office, looking flushed. He closed and locked the door behind him, went over to Ashok's desk, and demanded his personal bank statements. He knew Vinod and Ashok kept their papers in the office. He held out his hand toward Miss Tu. She said she had left them at home. Miss

Lee said the same thing. Ashok described his fear as Mr. Tejawani asked him and Vinod to hand over the keys to the staff apartment. Ashok turned his over, but Vinod held onto his.

“Shall I call the police and report you to immigration?”

Mr. Tejawani had raised his voice. That was enough for Vinod to hand over the keys.

“And now your passports and black books.”

The black book is the rough Taiwanese equivalent of the American Green Card. The real name of the black book is the Alien Resident Certificate (ARC). The ARC is given to a foreigner for a specified number of years.

Mr. Tejawani held the passports and black books in his hand.

Mr. Tejawani went to the door, unlocked it, held it open, and looked at Miss Tu and Miss Lee. Both of them picked up their handbags and walked out of the office.

Mr. Tejawani looked at the bank statements, saw the balances in them.

“Both of you go, one by one, to the bank. Take out the balance in your accounts and bring the money here. Don’t try to run away like Vivek Ajwani. I’m holding your passports and black books. You will be in trouble if I report you.”

“Sir, we are sorry for what we did,” Vinod tried.

Ashok muttered, “I’ll never do anything like this again,” knowing his apology was useless.

“Don’t make me take any drastic steps. Do as I say.”

Ashok and Vinod returned with the money, and Mr. Tejawani took them into his office to count it. He calculated what their salaries

would have been from the date of the first big deposit in the bank until that day.

“I am being very fair,” he’d told them. “Here is the money that is rightfully yours. Use the phones, buy your tickets for Hong Kong. Ask Kevin to deliver them here.”

Kevin Chen was Forever Fortune’s preferred travel agent.

When Kevin delivered the tickets, Mr. Tejwani accompanied Ashok and Vinod to the staff apartment and told them to pack their belongings. Then he took them to the station where the luxury coaches brought passengers to the Chang Kai Shek airport. He handed Ashok and Vinod their passports, and kept the black books. And before they had even loaded their luggage into the coach, he drove away.

The mystery of how Mr. Tejwani learnt about the shadow under his lamp was cleared up soon enough. Ms. Huang, the only person on staff that was not in on our scheme, had received a call from a factory manager, who said only, “Lunch time. Same place. I’ve brought your cheese.” When Ms. Huang started asking questions, it didn’t take long before she figured out what was going on.

“I can imagine her surprise at learning how long she had been in the dark,” Ashok added. His smirk, an attempt at dark humor, failed utterly. “She waited till Mr. Tejwani left at six, then followed him and told him the whole story.”

Now, Ashok worked as a clerk in a travel agency. Vinod had taken a job as a salesman in some store in Kowloon.

Ashok asked the inevitable question, to which I had prepared an answer. “You seem to be doing well, Vivek. Where are you working?”

“Oh,” I said, with a casual shrug of my shoulders. “I work in a Chinese trading company.”

“Can you get me a job there? Or with any other exporter?”

“Give me your telephone number. I’ll call you if I hear of something.” I had no intention of ever doing anything like that.

When my second daughter was born, I engaged a broker to find our family a house on The Peak; this was where the richest expatriates lived. We bought two apartments in a luxury high rise with a view of the harbor, one for June’s parents and her brother, and the other for us. I told June not to spare any expense in furnishing it just the way she liked.

I saw the amount of business in our markets. But one had to travel to get it, and I did not want to hire anyone to travel for me. He could easily learn my secrets—my items, my markets, my buyers, my suppliers—and do exactly what I had done to Mr. Tejwani. I decided to keep it in the family, and took Jay on a trip. Since Jay had worked in the office, he was familiar with the items. Jay turned out to be a fast learner. And he had a knack for handling clients.

When we were returning from this particular trip, I saw Mr. Tejwani in the immigration area. I made it a point to wait for him near the luggage carousel. After he had collected his bags, I walked up to him. He took a moment to recognize me.

“Ah, Vivek Ajwani.”

“How are you, Mr. Tejwani?”

“Cannot complain.”

“Still in Taiwan?”

“After you and the other boys did—after what you did—I decided to do the traveling myself. I said to myself, how much does a man need? He can eat only so much. He can wear only so much. I make as much as I need. Maybe a little more.”

“You must be working very hard.”

“On the contrary. I do exactly what I did before. But without anxiety, without stress. I read. I spend time at the American Club. I conduct bhajans on Thursdays and Sundays.”

“And business is coming in?” Did a twinge of conscience prompt me to ask the question?

“What is in my nasib. What is due to me will not be denied me. Why should I fret?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him about my offices and my apartments, but these things would not matter to a man like Mr. Tejwani. He seemed to harbor no rancor.

After the new apartments came the latest Mercedes Benz. I had never learned to drive, so I hired a chauffeur. Most of the residents in my building owned Mercedes, but few had chauffeurs. People thought I hired a chauffeur because I had money to burn, which was also true.

As the range of products that China produced increased, I felt that an office in Hong Kong was not enough. I opened another in Guangzhou in south China, and placed my father-in-law in charge. Two years later, I opened an office in the north, in Hangzhou, near Shanghai. My father-in-law interviewed, screened, and hired staff.

Jay called to update me on the most recent interviews. “One of the more interesting candidates my father interviewed was Chang Chan Ming,” he explained evenly.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, he’s from Shaoguan.” Shaoguan is a town deep in the north Guangdong province. “Chang Chan Ming is determined to make it big in an international city like Hangzhou.”

“Hmm.”

“He learns English in a bushiban, a cram school. During the day he takes a number of part-time jobs—accountant, salesman, whatever he can get.”

“Why doesn’t he have a permanent position?”

“As an interpreter to foreign buyers at the Canton Fair, he can earn more and practice his English—”

“—and hope to get hired by a foreign businessman. So why does he want to join us?”

The biannual Canton Fair attracts thousands of visitors from every part of the world.

“He’s applying for the Export Executive position, and wants to manage the Hangzhou office.”

“I like his drive. Is he as smart as he is ambitious?”

“He’s a quick learner. I sat down with him. I drew a circle in the center of the page with smaller circles, like a constellation, round the orb in the center. I taught him exactly the way you taught me,” Jay said.

Just as Mr. Tejwani had taught me. “And you explained CIF prices and made him practice them?”

Jay confirmed this.

“May Hua wants to get married,” June told me on one of my trips home. I learned that my oldest daughter had met Kwan Yee, a Malaysian Chinese man, while at college. It didn’t occur to me to ask June what sort of a man Kwan Yee was. I guessed that one son-in-law was as good as any other.

“Please go ahead and make the arrangements. You know money is not a consideration,” I told June. “Has the date been set?”

“Yes. Sometime in the middle of June.”

“That’s not a good time for me. This is the time our clients place orders.”

I noticed that June bit her lip.

“That’s also the time our competitors flock to our markets,” I continued. “I have to be with my clients, to stop the competitors from getting a toe in the door.”

“Vivek, I know. And I understand. But that’s the time May Hua and Kwan Yee have chosen.”

“Can’t the date be pushed back by six weeks?”

“No. My mother has talked to our astrologer. He says the stars are best for May Hua at that time. The next good time will be twelve months hence.”

June sent me frequent updates on the arrangements. It would not be proper if I didn’t attend my daughter’s wedding.

I flew in on the morning of May Hua’s wedding, attended the ceremony in the afternoon, said a few words at the banquet in the

evening, and drank a toast. At six the next morning, I was on my way to the airport.

“Jay wants to get married,” June informed me one evening. I had just returned from Chile.

“So we’ll make the wedding as lavish for him as we did for May Hua,” I said.

“But, but.” June said after a pause. “He wants to marry a TV singer, Juliet Hu.”

“What’s wrong with that? Why are you bothering me about a matter like this?”

“Juliet Hu won the singing competition they ran last year on the TVB.” She briefly described Juliet’s performance on the Hong Kong reality show, *The Voice*.

June bit her lip. “I don’t know whether you’d want Jay to marry a ... a public figure.”

I laughed. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

And so, disregarding June’s misgivings, the wedding was set in motion. I happened to be in town for the ceremony, and spent most of my time watching the dazzling views of Victoria Harbor and the Wanchai district from a balcony of the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong, where the reception was held. Pressed by her friends, Juliet Hu sang a few songs at the reception.

“She should not have done this,” June said. “She’s the bride, after all.”

Since I had money sitting in the bank, I decided to look for opportunities to invest. I'd worked for my money, and it was time my money started working for me. China, a growing power, was building high rises in over a dozen new cities each year. Developers and the rich in China and Hong Kong were buying up the buildings to rent or resell. I bought a twenty-story high rise in Tieling City and another in Kangbashi. The rents I collected on both places would be enough to keep my family comfortable for a very long time.

I noticed a change in Jay after his marriage. For one, he began to loosen his control over business matters. I had always believed and taught him that we must oversee every aspect of our operations. We should be able to tell offhand how many shipments were due in a particular week, how many orders were being processed, how many had been placed, how many inspections were needed.

“Jiějiě de zhàngfū, brother-in-law. Our business is on autopilot. You have given it such a strong foundation. Chang Chan Ming and my father and I know what is happening. We'll talk about this matter when I return from Singapore.”

Juliet Hu was keen to develop a wide fan base. She wanted to become a Grace Wong or a Bianca Wu overnight. She contacted event planners and charities in neighboring countries and agreed to perform for a low fee, or even gratis. Jay had not only to accompany her but also to finance these trips. He skipped two scheduled business trips to Brazil and Argentina for Juliet's sake.

After May Hua's first child was born, everything seemed to move more quickly. June cut back on her time in the office. Her father began to fly in from Guangzhou on the weekends, and didn't return until the middle of the week.

“My granddaughter. She so beautiful. She will grow up. She will want friends, not grandparents,” Mr. Yu said.

I developed gout. I didn’t eat rich food; I didn’t know why I should be afflicted with such a disease. The result was that I could not travel as much as I liked.

Juliet Hu felt that her husband belonged to the crème de la crème of Hong Kong society, and persuaded him to join the best clubs in Hong Kong. The first of these was the Hong Kong Club, which, until 1970, admitted only white British citizens, and until 1996, banned women from certain areas of the club. More memberships soon followed: the Hong Kong Football Club, the Hong Kong Jockey Club, The American Club, and the Aberdeen Marina Club.

Around this time, our company received two big claims. A buyer in Argentina received a shipment of polyester fabric with colors he had not ordered. And the contents of a container to Brazil, said to contain umbrellas, were filled with cheap plastic toys. Neither shipment had been inspected; Jay said he had forgotten about them. We had to refund the full amounts to both clients, and the factories refused to reimburse us on the grounds that the documents, stamped by Customs, carried the right descriptions. These two claims carved a deep hole in our profits. When I called Jay to my office to confront him on the matter, he made a hurried remark that he would be more particular in the future, and left the room.

I had long dreamed of getting even with Ram *maama*. One of the first outings I took in my new Mercedes was to Kowloon, where I directed my chauffeur to Ram *maama*’s store.

“You are showing your face after so many years,” Ram *maama* said when he opened the door. “My sister told me that you have been in Hong Kong all these years.”

“I have not come to meet you. I’ve come to order half a dozen suits and shirts. Please show me your best material.”

“Of course, of course.”

“I’d like to get a fitting before the final stitching.”

“Of course. Of course.” He told me the dates on which I could come for the fitting.

“I won’t be able to come. I’ll send a car to bring you to my house.”

When the date arrived, he stepped into my house, gaping—at the furniture, the drapes, the dining table of Italian marble, the chandeliers. I watched him singe with jealousy.

One desire had been fulfilled.

I had one other desire. This, however, took me a few more years to accomplish.

I wanted to be an Honorary Consul. I contacted many small nations that were not represented in Hong Kong. Finally, one of my largest buyers in the Pacific used his influence to get me the coveted designation. I pretended that my concern for the poor children of the Kingdom of Tonga had moved me to set up a charity there. I guaranteed the charity a certain amount every year.

As an Honorary Consul, I could use the diplomatic channel when entering Hong Kong. After my passport was stamped, I made it a point to tell the officer, “The first time I came here, one of you almost denied me entry.” I said it like a joke and added a little inoffensive laugh after it.

I loved to see the open mouth, the expression on the officer's face. No two expressions were ever the same.

Not long after attaining my status as Honorary Consul, a stroke confined me to a wheelchair, and even the pleasure of taunting the immigration officers was denied to me. Jay and Juliet continued to throw lavish parties at the clubs they had joined.

I watched their extravagant ways, seething inside. When I could stand it no longer, I expressed my discontent to June.

"You need to knock some sense into your brother's head. He has to cut down on his trips. We'll lose our clients and our markets."

"Well, he has trained up Chang Chan Ming well. Chang's first two trips have been very successful."

"What, is Chang Chan Ming traveling instead of Jay? Why didn't anyone tell me about this?"

"We did not want to trouble you in your condition. It is your time to rest," June said.

"Also, isn't it an unstated rule in our company that no employee other than family goes on a trip or meets a client?"

June didn't say anything in response to this breach of company principles.

"We are not earning money as fast as Jay is spending it." I had watched the rate at which our accounts were hemorrhaging, and it horrified me.

"How can you say that? The millions you put into the buildings you bought in China are as good as gone."

Although I was surprised at her outburst, what she said was true. Both the cities in which I had bought property, along with many in other cities in China, had become ghost cities. The reasons were many—they were located far outside the main cities and were priced too high, their declining profits the result of faulty planning. The millions I had sunk into them would take generations to recover.

The center was splintering. I could do nothing. I sat in my wheelchair at home near the bay window, watching the boats passing by, parodies of the pageant of life.

With the house quiet as a coffin on weekdays, I would hear of Jay and Juliet's trips round the world. Servants wheeled me to the dining room at mealtimes, and the bank statements were handed to me on the weekends.

The bank balances were melting like wax from cheap candles.

As quiet as it was the rest of the week, the house came alive on Sundays. May Hua, Kwan Yee, and their child spent Sunday afternoons in our home. Juliet and Jay joined us Sunday evenings, if they were not overseas. Jay would talk of how Juliet had impressed audiences, even though the rate at which her popularity charts were rising were only a fraction of her hairdressers' bills. The evening usually ended with the family eating dinner at one of the clubs.

But today, a Sunday, the house was quiet and Jay was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Jay?" I asked.

"Shortly after he landed from Bangkok yesterday," June said, "he rushed off to Guangzhou."

“But our offices are closed on Saturday.”

“He said he had urgent work.”

Jay returned on Tuesday.

June and her father, Mr. Yu, joined us in the living room. I was surprised they were not at work or at May Hua’s home.

“Jiějiě de zhàngfū, brother-in-law,” Jay said. “I entered our Guangzhou office and I found everything in order.”

“Why did you think anything would be wrong? Why did you rush off to Guangzhou as soon as you arrived from Bangkok?”

Jay looked at June. June looked at Mr. Yu.

“As you know,” Jay said, hesitating, “Chang Chan Ming went on a trip to Brazil on Wednesday.”

“No, I didn’t know about this particular trip. No one tells me anything anymore.”

Jay ignored my testy tone. “Just as we were leaving for Juliet’s show at the Siam Pavalai Theatre,” he explained, “I received a call from Chang Chan Ming. He said, ‘You need to go to our office in Guangzhou. I’ve sent you a fax. It’s urgent.’”

“‘I’m in Bangkok,’ I told him. ‘Tell me now if it’s so important.’ He said, ‘I can’t tell you on the phone’ and hung up. I called him throughout the rest of the day and also the next day, but he never answered, so I had to go to the office.”

“So what did the fax say?” I said.

“There were two faxes. He had sent two to make sure I received it.”

Jay took a piece of paper from his pocket, looked into my eyes for a few seconds, and read:

Bosses,

I'm sorry to give you this news. I'm resigning from your company. I have started my own company. Not in Guangzhou or Hangzhou, but somewhere in vast China.

Thank you for teaching me all that I know. I have fulfilled my dream of being the head of a chicken.

，

A Pièce de Résistance in Ottawa Rima

Blair Reeve



1. *Petty Crime*

I park on Wellington, no legal spots,
but other cars are here, so when in Rome,
and skip upstairs to see my stylist. What's
a little vice at noon? The wardens roam
these streets, I know it well, the parking bots
that mulct off petty crime. But I am ohm
to power flows, a rule-resistant joker;
the pricks who issue tickets are provoker.

It's lunchtime now. I leave *Hairiffic* shorn
and check the car, the street—it all looks safe;
the windscreen's clear, no paper chits adorn
my Countryman, no po-po there to chafe
my nerve, and so I pause, uncertain, torn—
another twenty minutes? I'm no naif,
my luck can't last, but tummy's light as pumice;
I head to *Beyrouth Bistro* for some hummus.

My business all wrapped up, I gotta scoot,
but as I come off Lyndhurst, there she is—
an officer all taut of belt and boot,
but damned if Central needs the optics, viz.
[a year of protests saw the coppers shoot
at crowds, ten thousand teargas canisters,
a few live rounds, one even struck a fellow;
I watched aghast, relieved the wound was shallow].

So this is why my dander gets up quick;
a mix of indignation, spleen and dread
begets me bolshing like a Bolshevik.
The cop is scribbling on her pad; my head
is hot and pointed down; I'd like to kick
her in the arse and fill her boots with lead.
Instead I make a beeline for the Mini
and designate the cop a trifling ninny.

I guess I'm obligated to inform
you peeps that this is now my fourth offence
in half as many weeks, and that a swarm
of tickets blights my fridge, a consequence
of one who treats infringement as the norm
then offers *fear-of-cop* in self-defence.
But claiming this in rhyme? I drop a clanger!
It's truer that I acted out of anger.

I drive off but an inch before the law
comes bully club a-drubbing on my car,
and turning to the source I hear the roar
of outrage from a righteous commissar,
his face ablaze in wrath, a gnashing jaw,
the violence of his fury just bizarre.
I stop, jump out, and try to douse the fire
with apoplexy as a pacifier.

I blow him up. The sergeant looks perplexed,
so I recast my bawling as surprise
(a case of tunnel vision retroflected).
“What’s going down, you brute?” I improvise—
no plan or clue for where I’m going next.
Magoo has been the model for my guise,
but now I’m done with klutzy Mister Quincy,
instead I’ll try a charmer like da Vinci.

“Thankfully, no dent.” I indicate
the roof that took a pounding from his bat,
and then point out my rego’s up to date,
as if to terminate our little spat.
“Your colleague there. I didn’t see her, mate,”
but PC Plod is having none of that.
“We’ve got a CCTV camera running,”
(*you lying gweilos think you’re oh so cunning*).

Now here is where I make a fool mistake.
The sergeant points his finger at the eaves
above our heads. I look, the gesture’s fake,
there’s nothing there but weathered moss and leaves.
I risk a laugh, aloof to what’s at stake,
and hint I know he’s hoaxing. He perceives
an insult here, his patience fully tested.
He summons two more goons—has me arrested.

2. Trial Rhyme

A year goes by. I’m bailed and arraigned,
the judge bewigged, the cops are in the dock.
The story I’ve concocted and maintained
seems watertight, a combination lock
of pluck and courage strenuously feigned.
My friends and kinsfolk know it’s all a crock
but I prefer the logic of the fiction.
My lawyer, Phillip, can’t rule out conviction.

*Returning to my car on Wellington
I saw three boys in blue, which quickly sparked
a tingling apprehension in my skin.
I knew of course I'd left my vehicle parked
illegally and thought if I jumped in
and left the scene before those cops embarked
upon a course of retributive action
that I could then avoid the due infraction.*

When we'd conferred, old Phil was circumspect.
"How *did* you miss her there?" he wants to know.
I mumble vaguely—*should've double-checked*,
then shake my sheepish head and offer faux
regret with shrugs and looks to that effect.
It matters not—Phil still collects his dough,
and though I'd rather not end up in jail
I'll sing his praises even if we fail.

So what's the charge? Obstruction of police,
with dangerous driving as an afterthought.
They say the law's the law and not caprice
but Phil agrees the second charge was brought
to punish me for gall and thus increase
the chances of a guilty verdict: *caught
attempting to evade a parking ticket,
the perp abused a traffic warden picket.*

So here we are, the pair of us in court.
I'm dressed smart-cazh, a suit and tie for Phil,
a bailiff, clerk, a mate there for support.
The judge nods [off] and Phil begins to grill
each cop in turn—their statements run athwart
the footage that we're hoping will instill
some doubt about the charge of dangerous driving
and disabuse the court of my conniving.

There *was* some footage, yes, but in this twist
of irony, the judge can see me drive
away—a hepcat in the groove—the gist
of which is *not skedaddling* in the jive.
For in my recollection I had missed
how deviously casual I arrive
upon the far side of the camera’s vista
just as the sergeant pops his mental blister.

Phil’s cross-examination takes a turn
towards the gruelling—who looked where, saw what?
The cops collude and hold their faces stern
as each recites, “We told the suspect *not*
to drive.” The judge, beleaguered, must adjourn
to pick apart this unconvincing knot,
and find his way to satisfied illation.
He needs a [coffee] week’s deliberation.

The days tick by, and then—we lose the case.
The judge convicts me, says he has no cause
to doubt the officers and must embrace
the legal principles on which the laws
are based, for sentencing. His coup de grace?
He shackles me to fifteen days of chores.
And though the driving charge is mitigated,
I leave the courthouse “guilty” and deflated.

A yearlong wait to get such short a shrift
was not the outcome Phil and I had planned.
I’ve paid him well but can’t help feeling miffed
I took his counsel not to take the stand.
I’m heading back to Central. “Wanna lift?”
but minutes later Phil can see first hand
his client wants a jackboot up the jacksie;
my wheel is clamped. He takes off in a taxi.

3. *Doing Time*

I'm called to Social Welfare for a course
on rules and codes and modes of unpaid work.
But first a public lackey must endorse
me for probation—some intrusive clerk
called Mr Leung, who needs to see remorse
(untainted by an eye-roll or a smirk)
before he recommends me for the service.
I flub my sorry blub as if I'm nervous.

But gloomy Mr Leung knows well the frank
charade—wants résumés and evidence
of spousal succour, how much in the bank,
a chat with loyal friends who must convince
him that his charge is not some septic tank
of contraband and social insolence.
He comes around, decides I'm not a peasant,
and switches mood to something less unpleasant.

Then Mr Leung conveys me to Ms Chan,
a cutesy officer whose dreary role
is *Finding Jobs To Build A Better Plan*.
Her nasal squeak offends my inner troll—
I spurn her courtesies as best I can.
This anarchistic tactic takes its toll
and she erupts—a screaming babysitter
whose neighbour's kid is dissident and bitter.

*The paint and varnish work is toxic. Fumes
invade these schools and hospitals; they choke
the disused stairwells, lobbies, rooms,
and body's cavities—a stealthy smoke
that permeates the throat and dooms
the painter to a chronic gloom. Revoke
yourself, get out, stop propping up their system.
Be bold Ms Chan. I know you can resist 'em.*

She sends replies, although her civil tone
is mechanized. My emails hence resound
with melody and flair, though often prone
to prank poeticisms—poached from found
accounts of lung disease, a censored zone
on social exploitation, underground
resistance memes and sites on dermatitis.
They poison us with scorn and then indict us.

*A sensitivity to fumes and heat
convinces me, Ms Chan, I'm poorly matched
for such cruel circumstance and must retreat
from further misemployment (see attached).
My doctor says it's best I don't complete
my nine remaining days as planned. I've hatched
a rash and can't proceed until the summer's ended,
or find me work with air con recommended.*

She does (the punchy emails do it) find
me work in cooler climes—at Food For Good,
a charity (hurrah for humankind)
that gathers unsold grub (a Robin Hood
concern) and gifts it to the poor, the blind,
the down and out (although they really should
avoid the stuff), and folk with needs more urgent.
We work at sinks with penknives and detergent.

We scrape the labels off the jars and dump
the junk food (past its use-by-date) and sludge
of frozen produce into bags, then lump
those into wheelie bins. I blaze the drudge
away like any slave and do not grump
about the work again. My sulky grudge
disperses—I stop feeling so affronted;
I've found a way to keep my umbrage blunted.

I hand my timesheets in to Mrs Ng
(Ms Chan has left the job—is that a win?)
at Social Welfare, sign the forms and fling
them down like dice (the questionnaire I bin)
then flip the place the bird. If I were king
I'd oust myself and take it on the chin.
Poetic justice, yes, but hollow sentence;
This poem does not dabble in repentance.

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Alone in the Crowd

(Excerpt from Prologue & Chapter 1)

Quincy Carroll

Whenever I'm bored on the weekends, I like to play a game. I leave my apartment early and head east toward the Bund, a sort of preliminary constitutional before the real walk begins. I caffeinate. I hydrate. I go on a few test runs before making my choice. In the years that I've been doing this, I've never been caught, and I attribute my success to what, from a young age, has been described by those around me as a natural circumspection, a tendency to set myself apart. That's not wrong, I suppose (at least, not in any ostensible sense), but it makes me sound like a misanthrope, which I'm not. I swear. I'm just good at being alone.

Which must explain, at least partially, how I came to Shanghai. I worked for four years at a multinational conglomerate in New York City after college—a humdrum, entry-level position I didn't love but didn't hate—and when the opportunity arose to transfer overseas (to Hong Kong, then Shanghai), I didn't think twice. For a while, I had been looking for a way out: of the rat race, of a social circle turned stagnant, of America, of myself. Here, I have a clean slate. I am anonymous. And that's precisely what the game is about. But at the same time, it demands resourcefulness, spontaneity, a sense of adventure, and stamina (both mental and physical). Most importantly, however, it's a distraction. And a welcome one at that.

There's only one rule to the game: no women or children. This is a parameter I set for myself on one of my first times out, a measure intended to keep me from looking (and feeling) like a creep. I don't have much interest in my subjects themselves, anyway—they're merely conduits for exploration. The term

“guides” is perhaps more apt. I keep a record in my journal of all the sessions I’ve been on, and for each entry, the only reference to the person I choose to follow is a brief description of their clothes and features at the start. It’s entirely innocent, nothing more than a bit of harmlessly eccentric fun. It’s opened my eyes to lesser-known neighborhoods in the city and, in a few cases, even resulted in new friends.

So, here's what I do: I purchase a large quadruple latte at ARABICA (the capitalization is theirs, not mine) on Yuanmingyuan Lu, a cobblestone promenade about a stone's throw from the Bund, then wander around Huangpu till what, on a weekday, would be rush hour, coffee in hand. I sip slowly, savoring the routine, mentally preparing for the day. By then, the street sweepers are finishing up and the photographers have emerged, posing newlyweds, models, and the occasional celebrity or two in the early morning light against the Beaux-Arts facades. Stopping traffic, quite literally, in the middle of the road. I saw Hugh Jackman once. For the first ten minutes or so, I try to focus on my senses, gradually waking up, documenting five things I can see (the sea anemone-like movement of a group of pensioners practicing tai chi; a giant blue container ship dominating the Pudong skyline; an otherwise glamorous model crushing the heels of her sneakers, smoking a cigarette, between takes; the national flags atop the buildings, still vigilant against foreign claims; security cameras everywhere, and I mean EVERYWHERE), four I can hear (a passerby speaking French; a public security announcement on East Nanjing Road; construction in the distance; even, at one point, birds in the trees), three I can touch (the interior lining of my coat; the railing on the Bund; the flimsy sleeve around my cup), two I can smell (perspiration; pollution), and lastly, one I can taste (invariably coffee, so sometimes I'll opt for something more nuanced and flavorful—a pour-over, say—instead). I've never been a morning person, despite always feeling more grateful and productive whenever it is I'm able to get up early,

and that's yet another benefit of the game: it keeps me from sleeping in. Sobriety has certainly helped.

Once I've made it to the Bund, I walk down to Shiliupu, a tourist marina exactly one mile south of the Peace Hotel, which I remember from my first week in town, when I was better about working out. At this hour, it's always type-A young professionals, clad in thigh-high neon shorts, listening to music and daubing at sweat as they jog inexorably past. By now, I've come to realize, not sadly, that I'll never be a runner—at least, not like that—but I still try my best to stay healthy, and this is the third and final component of what the game is all about. Usually, around this time, I tend to start looking—not necessarily for the person I'll end up following, but rather for some slow-moving, half-conscious pedestrian—to sharpen my focus and practice a bit. Another group of old men across from the Waldorf, this time flying kites. A tousled chengguan assuming his post. The pleasure barges at dock. At the intersection of Zhongshan and Dongmen Lu, I turn around, unless someone has caught my attention, and head back the way I've come. Descending to street level, I dispose of my cup, then unlock my phone and reset my pedometer and set up a new voice memo, titled according to the date. At Fuzhou Lu (or thereabouts), I turn in. The streets are much busier, the sidewalks more crowded, the faces all rushing past, and I begin my search for the first person to stand out to me, for whatever reason—just so long as he's male, as previously mentioned. I try not to overthink it. Once I have found him, I record a few notes regarding his appearance and the cross streets, then drop back and collect myself and attempt to concentrate as hard as I can on the present. Breathing in deep. Putting one foot in front of the other, I commit myself to his guidance and lose myself in Shanghai. Game on.

I have been tailing the man in the Balenciaga sweatshirt all morning, ever since seeing him come out through the revolving

doors of the China Construction Bank building on Jiujiang Lu, keeping a close, yet comfortable, distance between us as he leads me across the city, preoccupied with his phone, navigating the crowds with an uncanny show of awareness that, if not practiced, has to be instinctual: a magic, almost magnetic repulsion of others—an effortless cruising on his part. He's young, maybe mid to late twenties, and decidedly handsome by all accounts, eyes half-concealed beneath the cuff of a tight-fitting brimless cap: a bright, gaudy orange, the color of extroverts and construction zones, precisely what drew me to him initially, the reason for my choice.

We are on Line 10 now, heading north toward Jiangwan Stadium. He's sitting at the other end of the car, deep in conversation, the housings of his earbuds jutting out from under his cap so that it looks like he's talking to no one—or rather, talking to himself. I can't quite hear what he's saying. He's animated, though, gesturing with his hands in a way that seems more European than Asian, shaking his head vigorously, slouched in his seat, erupting into laughter at points. None of the other riders look up. I consider myself in the glass, and what I find there is a pale reflection—indeterminate, blank—a faceless stranger among strangers; another straphanger, just like the rest. He rises, preparing to disembark, and I track him in my peripheral vision, which isn't hard, given the color of his cap, all the while feigning attention at the monitor beside the door: a cartoon PSA. *Yield to the elderly. Stand on the right. Courtesy is a virtue. Don't spit.* The train decelerates into the station, barely swaying as it does, and a message plays overhead: *Wujiaochang. Doors on the left.* An onrush of people. It's utter chaos for a moment, every rider for themselves, and somewhere in the crowd, a child calls out. Balenciaga gets held up briefly, but then he's through, pushing his way upstream, an alarm now blaring over the system as the doors begin to close, stark in contrast to the tone of the previous announcement. I'm the last person off.

I've never been to this part of the city, so I do some research while we're making our way aboveground: Wujiaochang, or Five-Cornered Plaza, owing to the confluence of Handan, Siping, Huangxing, Xiangyin, and Songhu Lu. Etymologically reminiscent of the scene in *Gangs of New York* when Bill the Butcher says to Boss Tweed: *Each of the Five Points is a finger. When I close my hand, it becomes a fist.* As I continue to read the Wikipedia entry, I discover that this isn't the only connection the area has to Hollywood: in 2012, parts of the Spike Jonze movie *Her*, starring Joaquin Phoenix and Scarlett Johansson, were filmed here, and as I'm emerging from the station, it all comes flooding back to me: the enormous saucer-like enclosure over the Middle Ring Road, the elevated walkways, the futuristic feel of the buildings. Balenciaga seats himself on a bench at one end of the inground plaza, ending his call by the looks of it, and hunches over, scrolling idly. *At last*, I think, sighing. *A break.* All this walking's got me hungry. I post up at the first food stall I find, feeling about as lonesome as Theodore Twombly, and buy a salted chicken cutlet in a wax paper sleeve, writing down everything I've learned between bites. The note at the top of the page reads *Balenciaga: luxury fashion house founded in 1919 by couturier (a designer who makes and sells clothes tailored to a client's specific requirements and measurements) Cristóbal Balenciaga in San Sebastian, Spain*, since initially, given the colors and the name, I'd thought it was the logo for some Latin American politician. Bolsonaro, maybe? The More You Know.

It's overcast today, which makes imagining myself in the film hard, but I'm still in awe of the location as I sit there eating, watching a few clips on my phone: Theodore at home, playing the ukulele; lying on the beach, listening to music; at a restaurant, signing divorce papers; in the subway, breaking up, breaking down. If you've yet to guess, I'm a huge movie nerd, going all the way back to middle school, when I'd spend almost every weekend on the couch, watching the original Star Wars trilogy over and over on VHS. I can still recite Greedo's entire monologue to Han in Rodian (which isn't something I'm proud

of, by the way), and remembering that now, I can't help but wonder if it explains at least part of my attraction to living abroad. *A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away*. Wiping my fingers, I throw out the napkin and check in on Balenciaga, who still hasn't moved. He's staring up at the sky, lost in thought, arms pretzeled at his chest.

The plaza crisscrossed by shoppers. Grassy islands here and there. A boy dragged past by his mother, repeatedly dabbing into the crook of his arm. *Bù kěyǐ!* he shouts, in a spastic, slightly accented tone. *Bù kǒyǐ!* more like. I smile to myself. Kids. The roofs of buses visible over the rim of the square. Two leggy girls in cutoffs, masked and carrying bags. I put on my headphones and look to see if there's a new episode of my favorite podcast up, but no, there's not, so I go through their backlist, hoping to find one on *Her*. Strike two. Settle for the soundtrack instead. Just at that moment, I spot movement in the corner of my eye, and see it's Balenciaga, walking again, headed toward the northeast exit of the square. *Oonta goota, Solo?* I return my notebook to my backpack, then fall in behind him, checking the time on my phone: 14:22.

The music—if you can call it that—is atmospheric, more like ambient noise. In the time it takes me to get back into trailing distance, I experience a rush of excitement, a sudden frisson at being alive. We cross the street underground and pass through a curtain of plastic flaps, and the first thing to hit is the air-conditioning. The basement of a mall. More specifically, a food court: ice cream and sushi, a restaurant called Le Le Cha. Everything is spotless, almost sterile—you could eat off the floor—and the reflections from the lights are so blinding that I have to visor my eyes momentarily; it takes them a second to adjust.

I ease my headphones forward to hear the soundscape as well so that they're held in place by the tension but now seated a bit rakishly atop my head. Or so I like to think. Over the murmur of

the crowd, the constant cry of huānyíng guānglín: Welcome! We're honored you're here. Two young men arguing. A speaker hawking wares. Somewhere across the floor, what sounds like the whirl and beep and chime of a slot machine. I note these details and more on my phone and return to the music, then board an escalator. Balenciaga is already at the top.

I used to feel nervous whenever I'd follow people, thinking they'd pick up on me for sure, but if this game has taught me anything, it's that no one really cares. Your average stranger is too self-absorbed, each in his own little world, and Balenciaga is no exception. It's quite humbling in that way. Almost reassuring. Getting off the escalator, I panic briefly, since he's nowhere in sight, but then there it is again, floating above a set of shelves in one of the first stores after the landing, that neon orange cap. MUJI. I enter and browse for a bit on my own: brandless, minimalist home goods. An island of stationery and other office supplies up by the register, free to test out. I buy a couple of pens, then do a lap to ensure that there are no other exits and take a seat outside in front of the door on a planter-cum-bench. Coincidentally, the song that's playing ends almost right as I sit down, and the track from the beach comes on next, mellow and drowsy and light.

OK, Arcade Fire. I've never been a fan of theirs despite Spotify's regular recommendation under More of What You Like and the fact that I once learned a song of theirs in college while in a band with my friends. "The Suburbs." Remembering this makes me feel old. I learn more about the score on Wikipedia, a collaboration with Michael James Owen Pallett, a Canadian composer, violinist, keyboardist, and vocalist who received an Honours Bachelor of Music for Composition from the University of Toronto and identifies as gender-queer. Their favorite album? Xiu Xiu's *A Promise*, which I queue up next. I sit there and wait for a long time, listening and observing, until eventually, finally, mercifully, Balenciaga comes out.

He is carrying his purchase, or purchases, in a beige cotton tote with the name of the store stenciled in both Chinese and English on the front. He saunters with a limp, which I have noticed before, but it seems more pronounced now, for whatever reason. Maybe the trendier environment, or the people walking past: an old couple in matching argyle sweaters, clasping hands like young lovers; a man in pince-nez glasses; a pair of sullen, ash-faced goths. Each with their own identity, carefully crafted, painstakingly maintained. Personally, I have no style to speak of. I prefer plain, almost dowdy, clothing, though perhaps that's it, right there. The soundtrack fades out, and I play Xiu Xiu's *A Promise*, which shocks me with its cover art, a photo of a man kneeling with his dick out on a bed, holding a doll upside-down. Sex worker vibes, clearly intended to provoke. It's all a bit too raw and experimental and uncensored for my taste, so I swipe down and pause and switch back over to piano, this time the nocturnes of Fauré. No. 1 is in E-flat minor, and it refocuses me, pushing everything else out, haunting and pensive and full of undulating rhythms and syncopated accompaniment and layered textures, the best of his work. We pass window displays of toys, skin care products, jewelry, and books, as well as a bewildering store called DOPAMINE LAB (again, the capitalization theirs, not mine) sporting a brightly-lit sign of concentric neon hearts.

And here, it gets interesting. He's taking the elevator. I stand back and watch as he gets in, cramming toward the rear of the car. There's probably still room for me, but it would be stupid to get that close. Nothing more than pushing my luck. The doors close, and the floor indicator starts to rise, stopping at every level before eventually pausing on 5. Of course. *Whatever*, I think. *It's a challenge. Isn't this why I play?* I wait for the car to return, then ride it back up to the top. Floor 5 is all sit-down restaurants: teppanyaki, shabu-shabu, Korean barbeque, French, beef noodle soup. I circle the central chasm, peering into each one, then walk down a long hall directly opposite the escalator and check the bathroom, but he's not there either. Down to Floor 4. I'm starting to feel a bit worried by now, so I slide off my headphones and

rest them around my neck, no longer erring on the side of caution but rather the side of I don't give a fuck. Frantically searching. I'm about to give up and call it for the day when I see him on the escalator, descending to Floor 3. I'm at a full sprint by the time he gets off, people staring at me as I fly past, but I don't care: all that matters is that I stay on him and record what I learn until it's dark.

That's another rule: quitting time is at night. The reasons for this are many—it's important to set boundaries, for example, and it's harder to track after dusk—but the main one is to keep me out of trouble, away from the bars and clubs, as I'm now three years sober and, historically, that's where most of my subjects end up. Sunset tonight is at 18:44, according to Google, so I have a bit under four hours left. Gut check time. Home stretch. Balenciaga is about fifteen or twenty meters ahead of me now, a crew of three middle-aged women between us. I return to detailing the sights via voice memo on my phone, along with one particularly salient phrase recited by the women in unison—*xiǎo xiān ròu*—before erupting (once more, in unison) into laughs. A common saying or an inside joke? Maybe both. I'll have to look it up.

Boba. That was where he went. As he exits the mall, he sips from the drink infrequently, a purple concoction with black pearls at the bottom and a milk-white slurry on top. Taro, probably. Despite refraining from alcohol and thereby having my range of potential beverages reduced, I've never been a fan—even when you request less sugar, it's always too sweet. Just as well to stick to water or coffee instead. Or better yet, regular tea. I have a Nalgene I carry with me on excursions throughout the city, and this reminds me to stay hydrated, something I've struggled with for most of my adult life. I unscrew the cap and pull deeply, carefully, as I walk. The vessel is half empty; another five hundred milliliters and I'll have reached my daily goal.

There's someone waiting for Balenciaga as he emerges from the mall, another guy around the same age as he is, wearing a navy puffer jacket, holding a phone up to his ear. He hangs up at once upon making eye contact, leading me to assume that he was only calling to confirm location, and as they stand there, dapping each other up, it suddenly dawns on me, for the first time all day, that Balenciaga isn't Chinese—at least, not in terms of nationality. He's speaking English. ABC. I had him pegged for a fù'èrdài (child of the nouveau riche), when he's in fact a huáyì (foreigner of Chinese origin), just like me. Well, half like me, I guess. Technically. The accent is unmistakable, as are the N-bombs he's beginning to drop, which are unfortunate, not only due to the ugly nature of the word itself but also the fact that he's shown himself to be so predictable. A fake tough guy. A wannabe gangster. It's all so fucking trite.

Pardon my French. The two are on the move again, heading south down Huangxing Lu, a name that's grown familiar to me by now, ubiquitous as it is: parks, apartment complexes, statues, stadiums, schools. In addition to the streets and roads. There's not much to note on this particular stretch of sidewalk, so I reopen Wikipedia and am confronted by the naked photo from Xiu Xiu's *A Promise* again. I type in the name, and there he is: brawny, mustachioed, tanned—more or less what you'd expect the first commander-in-chief of modern China to look like. Buried atop Mount Yuelu in Hunan; also known as the "Eight-Fingered General," owing to wounds sustained in war. Something about fingers today...

Balenciaga and his friend are still walking up ahead. The game can be tedious sometimes, like right now, but there's no way around it. Better than sitting around, bored, at home. I learn the meaning of the phrase I overheard earlier, xiǎoxiānròu, as well as why it's referred to as dapping: "little fresh meat" (or "hot young guy" in English) and a possible backronym of *dignity and pride*, respectively. Probably apocryphal, in the latter case. They turn onto East Guoshun Road and pass a dilapidated live house,

desperate in the light of day, and continue on for another ten minutes till arriving at—you guessed it—Huangxing Park. They enter through the west gate and move onto a strip of synthetic rubber track that follows the pavement to either side and is only wide enough to accommodate three or four people and puts a literal spring in your step. To one side, bigger stone paths branch off among the trees toward an enormous central lake, around which a steady stream of pedestrians can be seen, all circling in the same direction, as though performing some ritual of Islamic pilgrimage, some duty commanded by God. But then I laugh when I consider where I am: China, the ungodliest of lands, which has to rank right up there with the reasons I love it as much as I do. Don't get me wrong—I'm spiritual, just not religious. A bad Christian, certainly. A lapsed Presbyterian. Or was it Episcopalian? You'd have to ask my dad.

Farther down the road, my guides turn in at a sign that says in flowing, stylized characters: 仲益全民体育公园, or Zhongyi People's Sports Park. The silhouettes of various athletes posed behind it, depicted on steles: basketball, baseball, tennis, soccer, badminton, golf. I'm expecting a game of pickup or H-O-R-S-E, but I couldn't be more wrong—their destination is a driving range, a low arciform building with a sail-like structure out front. Yet again, the game has come through: I've never golfed in China. To be honest, it's been years. I allow the two of them a few minutes to go in and get settled, then enter as well, scanning the bays. They are already hacking away at one end of the range with their backs toward me, so I find a place to stand, surveying the lawn—balls strewn everywhere like shells—and tune into the sounds around me: the plush thwacking of irons, the tinging of drivers; a loud thud, followed by cursing. I opt for a medium basket of balls to start and rent a set of lefty clubs, then move over to a mat and remove one of the higher lofted wedges and stand there stretching: dislocating my shoulders, windmilling my arms. It's a Saturday, so the place is pretty crowded, which relaxes me—no need to worry about blending in—but it's

difficult to stay focused and get into rhythm. I'm constantly checking to see if they've left.

They aren't bad, but they aren't good, but then again, I shouldn't talk. The last time I had a club in my hands must have been senior year of college, when I could play a full round for thirty-six dollars just by subscribing to a panlist. (My CV, which I haven't had to update in forever, still lists *intramural golf team* under Hobbies & Activities. Emphasis on intramural.) There's a wicker bistro set behind me, presumably for resting or observing or, in the case of my neighbors, ripping cigarettes between shots, but I lift up the table and carry it over to where I can see it and prop my iPhone on top. Launch YouTube, find a chipping tutorial. I start with relatively small swings, my hips finishing toward my target, my wrists locked, the blade striking the ball at precisely the right angle so the club does all the work. *This isn't that hard*, I think. *I've always been a visual learner*. If only I'd had YouTube in high school. Imagine how skilled I'd be. Golf, guitar, cooking—the list goes on. But then I take a slightly larger swing and slice the ball badly, sending it into the divider, causing my neighbor to back off and scowl. Duibùqǐ, I mumble.

Once I've gone through my balls, I purchase another basket. This time a large. Balenciaga and his friend are showing no signs of slowing down, and I'm actually starting to consider cutting them loose if they depart—I'm having that much fun. Bad shots and all. But then on my walk back to the mat, I become aware of a commotion toward the middle of the range: a crowd has gathered behind one of the bays, watching two men engaged in contest. One is Chinese (or Asian, at least), the other white. They are absolutely demolishing their balls, sending each one into the net, which must be said is only a hundred and fifty meters out, but still, the consistency is impressive. I look on for a moment, hoping to take away an observation that might help, but they both make it seem so easy, so effortless. It's frustrating as hell.

Back at my tee, I pull driver too, but it's a crappy domestic model with no flex in the shaft. I roll up to the net every time, if I make it there at all. I never claimed to be good. Balenciaga and Navy Puffer have been joined by a few friends—two men and a woman—commandeering a third chair from one of the bays next to them. Balenciaga standing. Navy Puffer up. Smiling, laughing, joking, applauding the occasional shot. It's nice to see, but that's what life in your twenties is like. I watch them between swings, torn between a kind of jealousy and contempt, trying to tell myself that they're just young and dumb and inexperienced, but maybe that's too harsh.

Another cheer goes up from the long drive contest, and the participants step back, smiling. Shaking amicably. Amid murmurs, the spectators disperse, a few bills exchanging hands. It's still unclear who, if anyone, has emerged victorious, and as I'm trying to figure this out, the white guy turns around, his face now discernible through the parting of the crowd: Alex Bleday. I know this man, and I know him well. No. Knew. A kind of de facto cousin throughout childhood, unrelated by blood; reunited in college after his transfer junior year; fraternity brothers; housemates; at one point, a close—if not my best—friend. I had no idea he was in China, though, let alone Shanghai. The last time we spoke to each other must have been twelve years ago in New York; even before I'd left the city, we'd fallen out of touch. It had happened very suddenly. He'd stopped replying to my texts, no longer reaching out, which I guess, in hindsight, wasn't surprising: it was clear that a distance had developed between us in the years since college, and what's more, he'd always had a sardonic edge to him (in almost everything he said) so that it was difficult to know if he was ever being earnest. If he liked you or not. A form of gaslighting, for sure. Till then, I'd always thought myself immune. Part of the inner circle. Like I said, a close—if not his best—friend. How wrong that had been. The real world had laid it all bare, exposing our relationship for what it really was: nothing more than a product of proximity and convenience, bound by foolhardiness, alcohol, and a smattering of mutual

friends. Add on the fact that Bleday had to be one of the most charismatic, intelligent people I knew—almost impenetrably, intimidatingly so—and it all made perfect sense. He'd outgrown me, plain and simple. It wasn't personal, I knew.

Still, you expect more from people. I sheathe the driver, then sit down in one of the chairs and do what I do best: watch. He doesn't seem to have noticed me, and it helps that I'm concealed by one of the columns supporting the roof. I can't believe it. Bleday. Here. I sit in stunned silence, studying him as he continues to hit, noting how he's changed since the last time I saw him: leaner, bespectacled, no longer rocking a beard, all of which suggests a more mature, less rough-around-the-edges persona than what I'm used to. Dignifiably subdued. I'm trying to decide on a course of action, but I find myself incapacitated, frozen, not knowing what to do—a feeling that is familiar but I now realize has been in a kind of stasis since "those bright college years." Ignore him or say hello? I have no idea how I'd be received. It's been so long.

By now, Balenciaga and his friends have all left, but I don't care. Bleday hits his final ball and begins to pack up, returning his clubs at the window. I leave my own where they are, deposit notwithstanding, and follow him out the front. A taxi is idling down by the curb, hailed either via Didi or terrible luck, and before I know it, he's off. I search to see if I can flag down a follow, but there are no other cabs in sight, and I'm left standing on the doorsteps, wondering if all that really happened, if I've lost him for good. I linger there for a minute before turning to head back in, and that's when I notice the surveillance camera, mounted beneath the portico, angled perfectly down at the street. Like HAL 9000 or The Eye of Sauron. I haven't lost him yet.

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Authors

Sonia FL Leung, a Hong Kong-based writer, is the author of *Don't Cry, Phoenix* (2020), a bilingual (English and Chinese) poetry collection with an album of ten original songs. Sonia holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction. Her work has appeared in literary journals, such as *Voice & Verse*, *West Trestle Review*, *Asian Cha*, *Remington Review*, *Mala*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, and the anthologies: *Afterness – Literature from the New Transnational Asia*, *A Personal History of Home*, and *Making Space: A Collection of Writing and Art*. Sonia is exploring publication opportunities for her memoir, *The Girl Who Dreamed*.

Sam Powney is an editor based in Hong Kong. He writes comic verse, poetry, and other pieces for fun, and is a longstanding fixture at *Peel Street Poetry*.

Murli Melwani taught English Literature at Sankardev College, Shillong, before making a mid-career change to head an export office in Taiwan. He is the author of four collections of short stories, *Stories of a Salesman* (1967), *Ladders Against the Sky* (2017), *Under the Indian Umbrella* (2018), *Beyond the Rainbow* (2020) and two books of literary criticism, *Themes in Indo-Anglian Literature* (1976) and *The Indian Short Story in English 1835-2008: An Historical and Critical Survey* (2009). Two of his stories were nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*, in 2012 and 2013. Murli and Mona live in Foster City, California, not far from the families of their son and daughter.

Blair Reeve is a New Zealander living in Hong Kong. He holds an honours degree in Japanese and English literature and an MFA from City University of Hong Kong (2012). His poetry has appeared in several New Zealand journals and Japanese expat collections, along with short stories published in the *Asia Literary Review* and other publications. Occasionally he breaks

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Quincy Carroll *is the author of two novels, Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside and Unwelcome. He is a graduate of Yale University and a former Artist in Residence at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai. He previously studied in the Writing, Literature & Publishing M.F.A. program at Emerson College and currently lives in Oakland, CA, where he is working on a new book. He is originally from Natick, Massachusetts.*

Artists



Dragonfly (cover)

Jade Bryant



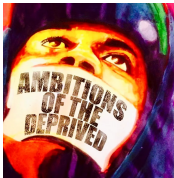
Kitchen

Ricky Rueda Sadosa



The moment you stop caring what people think of you is the moment you become free

Cassandra Lee



Ambitions of The Deprived

Dino



Hands in Time

Kasra Shroff



Des Voeux Road

Kasra Shroff



Portrait of a Nude Man
Charles Tang

