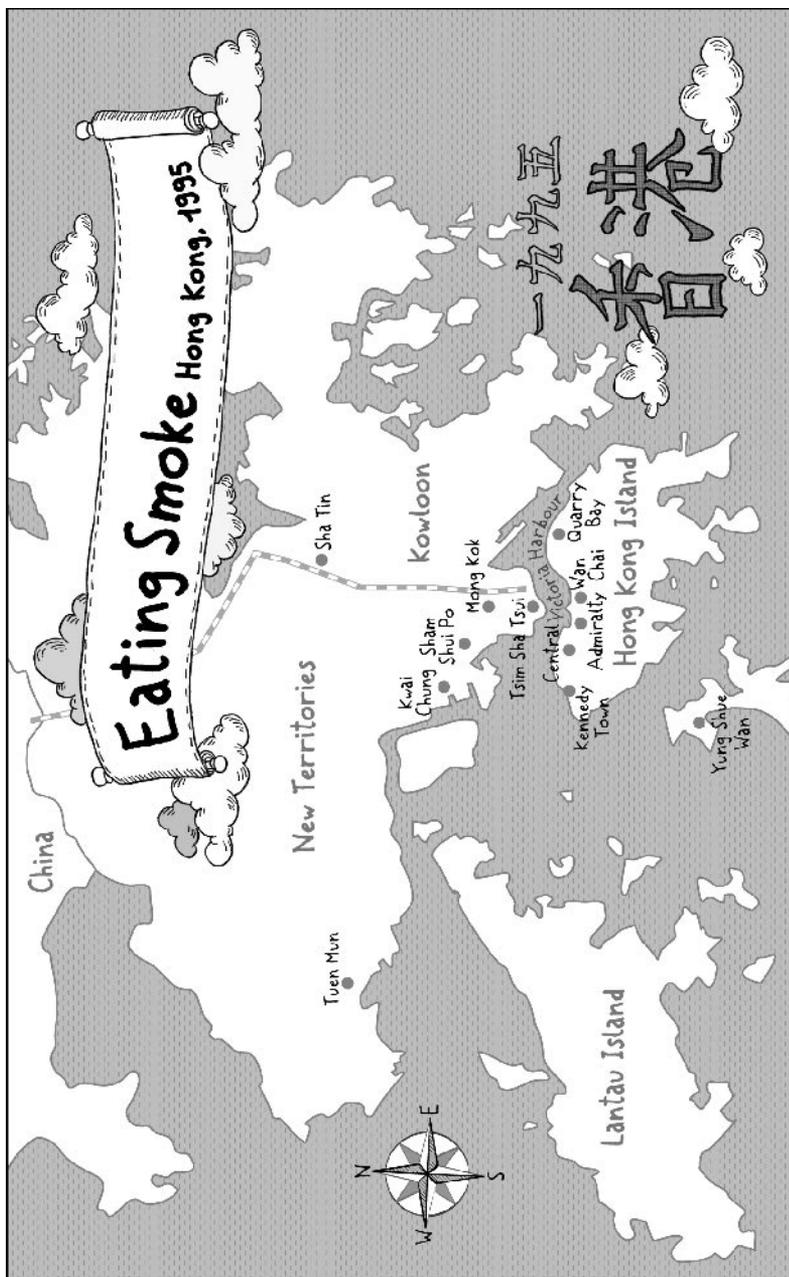


# EATING SMOKE

Chris Thrall

**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**





## *Prologue*

IN 2004, I WORKED IN A MENTAL HEALTH UNIT. People often asked, 'How can you stand it with all those nutters?' I'd quote from the textbook: 'It's a misunderstood condition affecting one in four people at some stage in their lives.' I never told the real reason. I worried that knowledge might confuse them. You see, in 1996, I went mad.

Now, this isn't necessarily as bad as it sounds. The UK has plenty of systems in place to help people who throw wobblers – doctors, medicine, hospitals, not to mention Incapacity Benefit and God. Unfortunately, these comforts were in short supply when it happened to me. Therefore, I must warn you: If your mind is planning on playing an away game, taking a sabbatical or simply fucking off, don't for Christ's sake let it happen while working as a nightclub doorman in Hong Kong's red-light district . . .



## *The Man in the Mirror*

I STARED INTO THE LARGEST SHARD of blood-splashed glass.

‘Do I know you?’

*‘You’ve never known him at all . . .’*

Sitting on the filthy concrete, I convulsed occasionally and whimpered like a sick dog. I hadn’t slept for days, the crystal meth pulsing through my veins denying all refuge from the madness enveloping me.

Now that the anger had passed, I found myself suspended in a ghostly calm, trying to focus my mind and piece together a life as fragmented as the mirror I’d smashed. I needed to make sense of what happened and put a stop to the Voice.

I leant forward, slowly, to examine the claw marks in my scalp and a haunted face I hardly recognised.

‘Is this *me*?’

The only thing still familiar was the eyes – although now they were bloodshot and yellow with pupils raging deep and menacing. I wondered if these black abysses could dilate further, triumphing over the turquoise rings around them, heralding the madness had claimed my soul.

I was in my flat, the Killing House, with its strange blood splats on the walls, not knowing whose blood it was or how it got there.

The Voice had named it that after the Special Air Service’s anti-terrorist training house at Hereford Camp back in England. I’d seen it in the film *Who Dares Wins* and on a visit to the base during my own military career.

In my mind, people surely suffered a terrible death up here, the top-floor apartment of a decaying tenement in a run-down part of Wan Chai.

As a mosquito whined in the glow of an underrated bulb, the sound of cats wailing, dogs barking and the hustle of the street scene below hardly made it up to the solitude of my smashed-up hovel.

I called it home, a humble abode by day that came alive at night, a place I loved a great deal more than the two-bedroomed new-build

I owned in Plymouth. It was a flea-pit with character . . . my very own piece of Hong Kong . . . That's exactly what it was.

*'Where's it all gone?'*

'I don't know . . . I don't know where.'

Memories of better days floated up out of the insanity like bubbles of clarity rising to burst atop a glass of mad soda . . . dining on top of the World Trade Centre with Dan, as teenage marines on our first proper holiday. Windows on the World they called that place, its lift shaking as it went up a hundred floors of a building already swaying in the downtown Manhattan breeze, then the ritziess of gold, marble, glass, and satin tablecloths, lobster, with strawberries and more of New York's awesome skyline to follow.

I'd chuckled to myself as the elderly toilet attendant ran the gold-plated taps and, with a respectful smile, handed me soap and a towel – only three days earlier we'd been lying armed to the teeth and covered in shit in a ditch in the Belfast countryside.

After our meal, the evening just got better. A limousine picked us up with the girls from Texas and we drank a load more champagne.

*'Great night . . . eh?'*

'Yeah . . . a great night.'

I'd left the Forces to run my own business in Hong Kong – or *Heung Gong*, to use the colony's rightful title: the Fragrant Harbour.

But that was all bullshit now. I had to think about my family. Despite all the difficulties, they were always there for me, my friends, too – the real ones, not the superficial ones struggling to understand themselves in this ego-fuelled city. There was no way I was going home, though, a failure with a bankrupt dream. How could I do that?

None of them would recognise me anyway. They certainly wouldn't like the dump I lived in, the amount of drugs I took, or that triads had followed me home, again, the other morning. I knew they were tailing me – hardly surprising after the bizarre chain of events unfolding that night . . .

An inch from rock bottom, I'd taken a job as doorman in Club Nemo. As with many nightclubs in Asia, although owned by a local businessman, the dominant crime syndicate organised the security, bar, prostitutes and drug deals. In Wan Chai, this was the 14-K – said to be the most ruthless brotherhood in existence.

It was 'Paul' Eng, a cross-eyed psychopath, who'd asked me to come and work for them. He was the resident *Dai Lo*, or 'Big Brother', a middle-ranking triad who managed Nemo's and the mobsters who ran it.

I was leaving the club the night they set me up. I hadn't been scared . . . *okay* . . . a little, but I wasn't going to show these guys that.

I laughed at them – frickin' gangsters with their sycophantic expat cronies and weird secret hand signs. I was still laughing when glancing over my shoulder I noticed a black Mercedes stalking me slowly from a distance through the morning-after litter adorning Jaffe Road.

I was heading back to the sanctuary of my flat, off my face on the meth I'd smoked the previous evening and looking forward to smoking some more, wondering if this would be another twenty-four hours clocked up without any sleep.

As the terror began to take hold, I decided to give them the slip by scooting up a back alley – a dark stinking shortcut that crawled with fat rats thriving on scraps thrown out of the back doors of restaurants. They weren't ordinary rodents, either. These dirt-matted mutants only scurried out the way so they could watch with contempt as you passed through their patch, jeering as stale water dripped down from antiquated air conditioners.

I ducked into the doorway of one of the grey buildings and shot up the back stairs, heart pounding the living daylights out of my ribcage, my breathing frenetic.

After several futile attempts at smashing through the ageing exit door, I found myself out on the roof, desperate for a place to hide and fumbling in the leather pouch around my waist for the mini Maglite and chain.

Illumination I didn't need – only the blunt force the torch delivered when connecting with someone's head. I'd never had cause to use it in the club – at least not as a weapon. It had come in handy at the end of the night, though, for scouring the disco's dirt-caked floor searching for any drugs or valuables the customers may have dropped – a trick I learnt from Dai Su, the 'Violent Hand' assassin.

They may well be coming with their meat cleavers – after all, that's a triad's prerogative – but it wouldn't faze me. Not much does when you're a mental ex-marine flying high on meth. I would do my utmost to fuck 'em up, and badly if necessary. This wasn't a place to mess around. There are no Queensberry Rules in Wan Chai.

Still, a hiding place might prove worthwhile.

Scanning around I spied a recess set into the roof, some kind of utility shaft. I grabbed the rusting ladder but only managed to get a foot on a rung before slipping, falling headlong into the darkness and – ‘*Umph!*’ – landing on some god-awful mess below.

Something broke my fall, but it was far from pleasant. I felt hair and cold, hardened flesh and smelt a stench – ‘*Urrrh!*’ – that would have been unbearable in anything less than a crisis.

It wasn’t just rancid, dead and decomposing . . . it was *human*, my mind flashing back to a corpse I’d stumbled upon on a riverbank in Cairo.

The next thing I knew the Maglite was on, and because this was Hong Kong, where situations can always get worse, I believed what I saw.

I don’t know if it was a mother and *her* baby, or a woman and *a* baby. Nor what she’d done or why. What I did know was she’d been hacked to pieces as a result.

Her face – what was left of it – still contorted with fear, as if she’d realised death was imminent, grimaced and, after the chopper sliced from crown to ear, her features had stayed that way.

I wondered if her tormentor had lopped her arms and legs off before or after that fatal blow, as they now lay awkwardly against her torso.

The little boy was on his back, draped across her midriff, with eyes gently closed and mouth slightly ajar, as if in peaceful sleep.

His tiny belly wasn’t so composed. Through a single slash, a rainbow of entrails spilled onto the woman’s emaciated chest, time and bodily fluid welding them together.

I tried to back into a corner but could barely move my own limbs. Bodies or no bodies, I would lie low here until the danger passed. Although the meth had stolen it all – friends, health, career, possessions – I still respected myself and could sit in the darkness next to two corpses and say, ‘Fuck ’em! Fuck *’em all!*’

The Chinese have an expression: *Life is meat*. It explains how the country can lose a hundred people in a coal mining accident, hide it from the world and carry on the next day, business as usual. Well, I had my own saying as I listened to my heartbeat in overdrive: *Meat is life*.

Besides, waiting shit out in adverse conditions is what the Forces train you for and the Royal Marines are the best at it. Lying up all night in an ambush position in the Norwegian Arctic has that effect on you. I could wait. I could wait as long as necessary . . .

I awoke later that day on the Hawaiian-patterned mattress covering my rickety bamboo bunk – the one I'd built to make use of the room space I didn't have. Cold in the tropical heat, ravenous and shivering with exhaustion, I gathered my thoughts and contemplated my next move.

It slowly dawned on me that it was dark already and I should have been back at work. I reached over, flicked the light switch and checked the Casio G-Shock.

*'Shit!'*

It had gone 10PM. I was over two hours late. Along with pawning my treasured Swiss watch, it was another reason to feel like crap.

I threw off the rough blanket lying across my midriff and eased my legs over the edge of the bed, hopping the five-foot drop to land unsteady on my feet.

In amongst the other junk littering my gone-to-pot attempt at tatami flooring was a crumpled page from an old newspaper. As I shoved a Marlboro between my lips and set it alight, an aerial photograph on the yellowing sheet caught my eye.

It was some kind of brick construction set into the roof of one of the colony's tower blocks. Filling the recess, as well as my attention, was the picture's focus. It looked as though someone had tried to create a grotesque three-dimensional Picasso using real people . . . although in reality, the woman and baby had been hacked to death in signature triad revenge.

An eerie *déjà vu* spread slowly through every cell in my body, like a banshee's wail building to a crescendo that both chilled and electrified my being.

Frantically I scanned for the date on the newspaper . . . *May 15th 1995* . . . was *three days* before I'd arrived in Hong Kong . . .



## *About Turn!*

‘CORPORAL THRALL, I’VE HEARD from certain sources you’re slightly unhappy upon leaving the Royal Marines?’ probed the commanding officer, horn rims halfway down his nose.

I was twenty-five and had enjoyed my seven-year stint with this elite commando force, but throughout the last year and a half as I tried to get a business off the ground in my spare time I’d met with obstinacy, even scorn, from certain ‘career-minded’ individuals.

Now, standing before the boss on my final day of service, I could sense that he, too, had jumped on the bandwagon and an officially ‘smug’ dismissal was on the cards.

‘No, Sir! Whatever gave you that idea?’ I replied. ‘I’ve had a great time in the Royal Marines. I’ll always be proud of being a member of the team. It’s just I have to take issue with you sending Corporal Johns to prison for two months for having his hair half an inch too long, especially as he’s got a wife and kids *and* a clean conduct record, Sir.’ I was referring to the outcome of a recent witch-hunt – one instigated by our regimental sergeant major, a rather unpopular character, who happened to be standing three feet away from me.

‘*Hmmmh?* I hear what you’re saying,’ the CO replied – rather generously as I don’t think anyone had been so frank since the formation of the Corps in 1664.

I waited for the standard military issue ‘*However . . .*’

‘*However . . .* I must say this *is* the *Royal Marines*, Corporal Thrall. We have to have that kind of discipline, you understand?’

‘Yes, Sir. That’s why I’m leaving.’

It was a fitting answer, when ‘discipline’ equates to kangaroo-court logic and fifty-year-old colonels can’t come up with anything better than ‘however’ speeches.

‘Well, I wish you the very best of luck outside, *Mister* Thrall. You’re dismissed.’

‘Thank you very much, Sir. Goodbye,’ I replied, the provost sergeant giving me the order to about-turn and leave the room.

As I walked towards the door I could feel the rsm's eyes burning into the back of my head.

*'Mister Thrall! If you think that doing two months is harsh for having your hair half an inch too long, you don't belong in the Royal Marines!'* he barked. *'But good luck in Civvy Street anyway.'* Then he scowled at me as I walked towards Stonehouse Barracks' huge iron gates for the last time.

He just had to get that in. I didn't mind, though. I'd built a multinational sales organisation from humble beginnings in Plymouth and after eighteen months of hard work, it had gone banzai and was pulling in the big bucks in Hong Kong.

Their personal attack alarm sold me on the idea of becoming an 'independent distributor' for Quorum International, a network-marketing venture already achieving success in the States. I knew that on a camp housing five hundred marines, many of whom saw their partners infrequently, selling the concept of security via these pocket-sized I-don't-want-the-missus-to-be-attacked alarms would be a doddle.

By the end of my third week, I'd sold enough yellow plastic spouse-protectors to scale the first four levels of the promotion ladder, reaching the dizzy heights of senior executive.

Whilst serving out my notice, I continued to sell Quorum's products but unfortunately had to give refunds for all the home alarms. The supersonic booms of Concorde as it flew over Plymouth every evening were setting off their pressure sensors. This didn't stop me, however, from sponsoring a significant number of distributors into my network, which now spanned the UK and Europe.

Yet despite my efforts and promotion to 'silver' executive, two positions away from financial freedom for life, I slid further into debt. It was costing me a fortune holding meetings in lavish hotels every week and making trips abroad. Then six months prior to my leaving the military, my creation, the *MaxTech* Group, witnessed a miracle, an eleventh-hour redemption in the form of Lee Han Keung – or 'Vance' Lee, as I would come to know him.

It came about by chance, having invited Dave 'Flash' Gordon to a business presentation. His reply had been frank: 'I'm not interested, but I met a guy on my military police course who will be. He's in the Hong Kong Army. Is your company opening up there at any time?'

'No, mate,' I told Flash, 'but if it does you'll be the first to know.'

When I arrived back at my office – a part of the kitchen I'd upgraded with a desk, fax machine and hand-held electric whisk – I picked up a fax from company headquarters announcing: QUORUM INTERNATIONAL'S HONG KONG LAUNCH!

Attention caught, I read on '... so if any of our European distributors have connections in Hong Kong, you should contact them right away.'

'Well I never!' I thought and smiled, stopping short of reading the Orwellian innuendo that followed.

During a telephone call to Vance, he declared, from his ever-loyal disposition and without even asking what it was really about, that he would start straight away. True to his word, he went on to build Quorum's largest distribution network in Hong Kong and the first of its kind in mainland China. It was only the start of the Asia Pacific operation and I was receiving five percent of our turnover.

A couple of months before I left the Forces, one of my colleagues asked, 'Are you still involved in that marketing *shit?*' insinuating I was either an idiot *or* I didn't belong in the Royal Marines.

'Yeah, mate. Check that out,' I'd replied, flashing him a monthly bonus cheque for £2,600 – three times our military salary.

He was right. The RSM was right. I definitely thought I was right. I belonged elsewhere ... in Hong Kong, the business capital of the world.