

My first impression of Hong Kong was how backward it was, in terms of both the place and its people. The dialect they spoke – Cantonese – sounded like *ngon, ngon, ngon* to me, strange and totally incomprehensible. For all I cared, I may as well have landed on Mars. But there was no denying one thing: the food was good, even for the poor. I could never get enough of the wonton dumpling and the noodle which was springy and seemingly never-ending. Noodles cost thirty cents with the wonton, and ten cents without, at a *dai pai dong* (street hawker stall). I had to cut the noodle, with each mouthful, in between the lower lip and upper incisors.

The local customs were loud and boisterous. It was a new world.

PART 2

HONG KONG

Hong Kong in the 1950s was like the Wild West of China, teeming with activity; it was a time of seismic changes.

The end of the Second World War did not herald the start of peace in China. On the contrary, the situation took a turn for the worse as the civil war for the control of China was reignited between the two opposing camps, the Communists and the Nationalists. It raged on until 1949 when the defeated army of the Nationalists took refuge on the island of Taiwan and Mao Tze-tung triumphantly declared the founding of the People's Republic of China at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. However, there were still pockets of resistance along the coastal regions which protected the Nationalist army's route of retreat to Taiwan.

The war disrupted many lives and caused people to flee to the safe haven of Hong Kong, under British rule since 1841. But the big influx did not take place until the early 1950s when, fearful of Communism, refugees began to pour into the Colony in large numbers, coming by land, sea and air.

In the decade that followed the Communist takeover of China in 1949, the population of Hong Kong increased six-fold, from a mere half a million to three million. The new arrivals were rich farmers, capitalists and common people, but among them were criminals taking advantage of the chaos that prevailed at the time.

Triad societies shot up like mushrooms overnight and they thrived in the new environment, gaining power and becoming influential. In this new order, the Hong Kong government faced many problems with a large population impoverished by years of war and no resources of its own. The infrastructure was bursting at the seams. Housing was in acute shortage and the government could do little to ease the situation. The new arrivals built illegal huts on land and hillsides around the old airport at Kai Tak. From a high point, one could see an endless sea of shanty towns on a vast swathe of land that stretched all the way from the airport to the slopes of Lion Rock, so named because of the peak's resemblance to a lion in repose.

The new order created massive social and other problems for the government. There was a huge army of unemployed, many of whom had all but given up hope of finding jobs or returning to China even though many, particularly the rich from Shanghai, still considered the Colony a transit point, a springboard to the USA, their ultimate destination.

For many, the Colony was regarded as a living hell in which they languished while resorting to all the means at their disposal just to stay alive. It was a hotbed of crime. Food was scarce, prompting many of the refugee families to survive on whatever they could lay their hands on. The unhygienic conditions in which the refugees lived were breeding grounds for diseases which were widespread in the so-called 'nest of rats and snakes'.

Every fresh wave of new arrivals brought new problems. Hong Kong became even more ungovernable. Yet, to the British, the Colony on the edge of China was a valuable trade centre which they were determined to keep as a capitalist outpost. This policy was part of Western strategic thinking at the time, a global initiative to keep the advance of Communism at bay.

London ordered the reinforcement of the local garrison amid contingency plans for emergency evacuation of its subjects to Australia if the strategy of containment did not work. Fortunately, the value of Hong Kong was also appreciated by the new Communist government.

The People's Liberation Army was ordered to advance no further than the Sino-British border.

Thus, Hong Kong was saved.

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On 10th October 1956, riots broke out during the celebration of the revolution that had brought down the Qing Dynasty in China in 1911. Disgruntled refugees took to the streets in their thousands after an officer of the British Crown ordered the removal of certain Nationalist flags. It sparked anger among the refugees.

The various political movements instigated by Mao had turned China topsy-turvy and created havoc for its people. Anti-Communist feeling in Hong Kong was made worse by the living conditions that prevailed at the time. Sentiments reached boiling point.

Riots in the streets at first were patriotic, mostly anti-Communist, before they turned ugly, soon developing into a means for the refugees to air their grievances against the Hong Kong government for its inability to solve the many social and economic problems of the day. Angry mobs came pouring out from the shanty towns in Kowloon, ransacking and looting shops and properties. At first the police did not intervene, thinking that the disturbance would die out quickly, but by the next day it evolved into a fully-fledged riot.

Anything that was considered Communist became a target of attack. Nathan Road became a battle zone. A mob broke into a social centre where they killed a number of people. Factories in Tsuen Wan owned by Communist supporters came under siege and were seized by the mob. Known Communists and their sympathizers were kidnapped and some were brutally killed.

The riots gave street kids the opportunity to see 'life', so to speak, an exhilarating experience that aided the growing-up process. The

atmosphere was almost carnival-like. The kids joined the riots, marching, shouting slogans, throwing stones and breaking things along the way.

Kwok Sun and I were just a couple of unruly kids who considered the streets our playground. If something as exciting as riots broke out we thought it our business to find out what was happening there. We took part in the riot because we found it exciting – it enabled us to see the world. During the day of the riot we played truant. We put on school uniform, had our breakfast, said goodbye to our mothers and pretended it was a normal school day when in fact we were joining the riot and could not wait to be there and be a part of the adult world. It sent adrenaline through the system to be able to chant, while stomping the ground in formation, slogans like: “Down, down, down colonisation.”

The truth was that neither Kwok Sun nor I knew what the riots were about, let alone the meaning of the many slogans that were chanted by the rioters. It was just plain fun to follow the adults and be part of the street carnival.

On one such occasion, the police cordoned off one section of Nathan Road. A line of policemen in riot gear carrying shields and batons stopped the mob from advancing further. In order to consolidate their defence, the rioters in the front line locked arms to resist being driven back.

The contingent of police was under the command of a single British officer mounted on horseback. After due warning and the crowd refusing to disperse, the police took action – but those in the front row could not disengage themselves because their arms were interlocked. They became sitting ducks as the tall officer dismounted calmly.

He grabbed a man by his hair and lifted his head upward and, after removing the man's thick-rimmed black spectacles, he slowly and methodically folded and placed them into his own front pocket before landing a thunderous blow on the man's head with his baton. As blood came gushing out, the officer lifted the man's head again. Still conscious, he struggled to free himself from the locked arms but in vain. He was helpless, completely at the mercy of the officer as he tried desperately to turn his face away.

Anticipating that another blow could kill him, the crowd of onlookers became agitated. Much to the surprise of everyone, the officer did not attack him again. Instead, he calmly placed the spectacles back onto the man's blood-covered face. The spectators cheered and applauded in relief. But before the roar of approval ended, the officer resumed his one-man hostility against other demonstrators.

One by one, he clobbered the heads of the other front-line demonstrators until all their faces were covered by blood. Heads dropped limply but their bodies were still held together by the human chain until, one by one, they fell to the ground as the connection gave way under their collective weight. The officer then remounted his horse as if nothing had happened.

That cold and callous act petrified my friend Kwok Sun and me. It was too bloody and horrible for us to watch. We left the scene hurriedly, absolutely terrified by what we had seen and vowing never to return.

Night had fallen. The pavements of Shamshuipo were sheltered by overhanging balconies of buildings typical of the time. For as far as the naked eye could see, the pavements were covered by a continuous stretch of makeshift tents, made of any materials the refugees could find to build temporary homes for themselves: sheets of tin, cardboard, paper or just dirty linen. It was also lined with rows of stoves and kitchen utensils.

“Look, this is their dinner,” I said to Kwok Sun as I pointed at rats on a tin plate. “They are about to cook and eat them. Can you imagine?”

There were four of these rats, skinned, cleaned and ready to be cooked. The oil in the wok was simmering hot. One by one the rats were picked up by the tail and dipped into the wok, making a sizzling sound in the process. Meanwhile, the rest of the family including two young children sat gleefully on the floor waiting for dinner to be served.

Kwok Sun and I watched in amazement. We could not help but think how lucky we were. My father had a job as an accountant in the cold storage factory and his father was the owner of dens in the Kowloon Walled City where gambling, prostitution and opium-smoking took place.

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The fascination of the riots proved too great to resist. The next day, Kwok Sun and I went back to the scene. A large crowd of troublemakers had gathered in Nathan Road, waving fists, carrying banners and chanting slogans as they marched down the street.

“Look, look at the car,” Kwok Sun suddenly shouted in excitement. “The driver must be crazy. Of all places, he had to come here now. It’s show time.”

I turned and saw a car suddenly appear from a side street, swerving quickly onto the main road before it came screeching to a stop. The driver had obviously discovered he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But it was too late. He had driven straight into the crowd and, like a lone sheep straying into a pack of lions, was soon surrounded by the rioters.

Sensing the danger, the driver tried desperately to do a U-turn. The front and back of the car were both blocked by crowds of people shouting, kicking, pushing and hitting it with whatever they had to hand.

The driver hooted the horn incessantly in panic, the sound of which only whipped the rioters into a state of near-frenzy. The passenger in the back – a middle-aged, blonde European woman – was terrified. This gave the rioters an excuse to vent all their years of frustration and anger against colonial rule and the ‘white masters’. This woman to them was a symbol of colonialism and all the bad things associated with it, a valve through which they could air the grievances that had been nursed in silence for years since coming to Hong Kong as refugees.

The petrified passenger screamed as she was dragged from the car and a rioter poured gasoline over her. Amid her wailing, screaming and kicking while she was lying on the ground, a match was struck and she was set alight, to the horror of the onlookers.

She was burned alive.

The police later investigated and, from eyewitness accounts, they were able to identify and trace the culprits. They were arrested at their homes and taken back to the station for questioning. After a fair trial, no fewer than four of them were convicted of murder and sent to the gallows.

It was a gruesome sight. I could not understand how the mob could have perpetrated such a cruel act on another human being. The horrific incident created a lasting scar on my young mind.

THE WALLED CITY

Kwok Sun and I were classmates at a school in Mun Sang at the foot of a hill close to where we both lived. I actually lived in Grampian Road where the school was located. Kwok Sun was indigenous to Hong Kong; his family had been here for at least five generations and his home was inside the Walled City which abutted the school. His family home, a two-storey walled house with its own garden, stood out prominently within and was unique in the sense that it was independent. There was no other house like it in the enclave where all the buildings were linked together in an intricate network of narrow streets.

The Walled City was originally a military outpost going back to the Soong Dynasty, mainly protecting the salt trade. Under the Treaty of Nanking, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain and later, in 1898, the New Territories, located north of Boundary Street, were leased to the British for ninety-nine years.

The later Treaty specifically excluded the Walled City, giving China the continued right to keep officials there as long as they did not interfere with the Colonial Administration of Hong Kong.

This exemption created an anomaly – an enclave within Hong Kong that was considered taboo to the Hong Kong government, thus giving rise to the state of lawlessness that prevailed within its confines. It was a haven for criminals who openly plied their trades with impunity, with brothels and gambling and opium dens.

Later, the Walled City also became a lair for unlicensed doctors and dentists who were mainly new arrivals from China. Not being licensed, they were forbidden to practise elsewhere in the Colony. Thus, the City was a place where 'anything went', ruled by organized crime syndicates known as Triads of which the 14K and Sun Yee On were the most prominent.

There were only a few entrances to the Walled City and there the Triad members kept a watchful eye on all who entered. *Gweilos*, as the locals call foreigners, were absolutely forbidden to enter. When a local asked the guard why his *Gweilo* friend could not get inside, the standard answer was always: "We cannot guarantee his safety."

"Let me show you the Walled City," said Kwok Sun one day. "It is such an exciting place after dark. You will like it." We were both in our early teens at the time.

"My parents always warned me never to set foot there or I would be severely punished," I replied. "Isn't it the most sinful place on earth? There are gangsters, bad women and drug addicts, and it is dirty and smelly."

"Come on. That is exactly why it is so exciting. You have to see it to believe it. I can also show you where I live. You don't have to tell anyone that you have been there. I shall not talk either. I can tell you all about the Walled City. You will never find a better guide than me. I was born there and have lived there all my life. I know every twist and turn, and who lives where and what they do for a living. I know all the secrets. Come on, let's go."

It was too exciting a proposition for me to say "No". Besides, who was going to find out that I had been there? My parents certainly would never know. I had just finished dinner and normally it would be hard for me to get permission to go down to the street to play, but that night my parents had to go out and there was no good reason to keep me in the crammed apartment. I wanted to explore and I could not think of any place more exciting than the Walled City.

It was August. The summers in Hong Kong are hot. Men wore a vest or were bare-chested while women wore a blouse and shorts made in a

black material that was popular at the time. During the day the heat was stifling, the air thick and stale. It cooled down at night.

On the way to the Walled City we stopped at Loon Shing Theatre. The streets in and around Lion Rock Road were teeming with activity. It was around the time that the first film screening had just finished and others were waiting to get in for the next show. There were hawkers everywhere peddling fishballs, curried squid, preserved fruits, soft drinks, ice cream and other snacks. Operators covered the pavement with sheets of paper with drawings that depicted fish, shrimps and crabs in different squares. Working in cahoots with the operators, the gang members would place bets on the squares. They were there to lure gamblers to place their bets and play a game of dice.

When all the bets had been placed, and at the critical moment before the dice were cast from a rice bowl, an accomplice at a signal given by the operator would shout aloud: "*Chow kwai, chow kwai, kin chat, kin chat* (run, run, police coming)." The operator would lift the piece of paper by its four corners and bolt. Thus, in one scoop, he would take all the cash that had been placed as bets.

The same trick was successfully pulled off outside the same cinema constantly. Fearful of reprisals, everyone just kept tight-lipped, including the victims, because they all knew these men had triad backgrounds. Customers just kept coming. The first bets were always made by one or more of those who worked as accomplices to the operator and, while they placed bets, they also encouraged others to follow suit.

A customer, including an accomplice, could also remove someone else's bet, say, from the sign of the shrimp to the sign of the chicken. If he did, he assumed the role of the banker. The winnings or losses would be settled directly between the remover and the original punter. If the remover won, he would collect from the banker and if he lost and the original punter won, it would somehow be settled directly between those two parties.

"I think it is chicken this time. Yes, I am sure it will be chicken. Let us move that man's bet. We move it from shrimp to chicken?" I said

excitedly. "Quick, quick, Kwok Sun, I am sure it is going to be chicken next round. We will win. Come on, I know it is okay. Just trust me."

"I don't have the money to pay if we lose. Do you?" asked Kwok Sun.

"No, I don't either," I whispered in his ear. "But if we lose, we can just dart off. I don't think they can run faster than us. Come on, it's okay. Don't be chicken."

Kwok Sun then squatted down, lifted the coin and moved it to the chicken sign. The original gambler just looked at us two kids, but did not object or say anything.

As the dice were rolled, I felt a chilling sensation creeping down my spine. I was ready to run. The consequences would be disastrous if the dice showed no chicken heads. We would surely be beaten black and blue. Just as I was about to sprint, Kwok Sun shouted in excitement, "We won. We won." The two of us embraced each other and jumped in excitement. The dice showed three chickens.

We had won \$1.50 from the original bet of 50 cents and it wasn't even our own money. An indescribable joy showed on our faces.

"Pay us. Why don't you pay us? We won \$1.50, didn't we?" In puzzlement, Kwok Sun, trying to act older than his age, shouted at the operator, "Why don't you fucking pay us?"

"Yes, why don't you fucking pay us?" I too pointed my finger at the operator and tried to act tough.

He looked the other way and ignored us. As bets for the next round of play were placed, we looked up and saw this guy appearing from behind the operator, arms folded with enhanced biceps each the size of a cat.

"Let's go. Let's go," I said gently as I elbowed Kwok Sun.

"Yes, let's go." He nodded.

We started running. Looking back, we saw that no one was following. I sighed in relief. Then we walked spiritedly, bouncing up and down, larking and teasing each other.

"Of the thirty-six stratagems, the best one is to run," I said as I placed my arm around my best friend. "Yes, the best riddle is to run... Ha! Ha! Ha! Life is so exciting!"

A man sat on a tall chair at the entrance to the Walled City. He greeted Kwok Sun as we entered. As we walked down the steps, I noticed some overhead wires that were carried on two poles erected on each side of the street.

"What are they for?" I asked. "Don't you have electricity?"

"No, we don't. Our electricity comes from buildings across the road," replied Kwok Sun. "Nor do we have running water. Our water comes from wells. Nor do we have flush toilets. Our nightsoil is collected. The government can't touch us and they don't do anything for us. The Walled City is built on sunken land. It is literally a hole in the ground. My ancestors dug a huge hole on which they built the city. Then they used the earth to make bricks to build the wall that once stood and surrounded the city. It is built at the foot of a hill on a gentle slope."

At the end of the steps and after a short walk, we came to an open space, a sort of piazza. It was dimly lit and looked rather eerie. We turned into a brightly lit lane no wider than a man with his two arms fully stretched out. A maze of tightly packed, tiny shops lined the two sides. On entry, one was overcome by a stench, a foul smell that is difficult to describe. It could have been a combination of its location, the air that was trapped there, its buildings, old and dilapidated, and its lack of a drainage system, made worse by the poor hygiene conditions.

"Hey, kids, you shouldn't be here," said a woman in a colourful *qipao* with slits so high up her legs one could see the colour of the underwear she was wearing. "This place is for the grown-ups. You are too young even to be spring chickens. Come back in a few years' time when you grow older and I shall give you a red packet for your virginity."

The other women on both sides of the lane burst into laughter at the remark. There must have been at least twenty of these women of different ages lining up against the walls.

"No, no, you come to me first. I shall give you a double red packet if you give me eternal youth," one woman said, half in jest. "Check out my breasts. They are big and firm. And look... who has this crevice? It's long

and deep, the best in Loon Shing (Walled City). I shall send you straight up to Seventh Heaven. She is no good for you. Look how old she is.”

“Ignore them. Don't look at them,” whispered Kwok Sun. “These are prostitutes.”

“What are prostitutes?” I asked.

“They sell sex.”

“What is sex?”

“You know, a worm going into the black forest,” replied Kwok Sun. “I have explained that to you before. Don't you remember?”

“Oh, you mean our dick... doing the big thing.” I laughed.

Numerous signs hung in a haphazard manner everywhere, competing against each other for attention: ‘Guaranteed Cure for Far Lau, Mango, Pak Chut...’ – names for different venereal diseases; and ‘Fairy Oil for Chong Yeung, Pak Kui...’ – ointment used to rub on one's penis to restore manhood.

At the end of this busy lane, we came to a quiet open space. It was dark but not so dark that we could not see what was going on. On the roof of the buildings below, the mice were having a picnic. There were hundreds of them, larking and chasing each other, frolicking and playing or chewing the debris that had piled up, and the noise they were making was almost deafening. They showed no sign of being fearful of people as we passed.

Then we turned into another dimly lit lane. Men, presumably coolies, could be seen walking slowly, heads down, along the lane. Some of them appeared to be unsteady, listing from side to side, as they walked. They looked somewhat delirious as if they were drunk. One man dressed in black carried a long hammer, the tool of his trade, on his shoulder. As his silhouette passed us, I thought he looked solemn and serious. The atmosphere of the lane was in sharp contrast to the gaiety and laughter of the girls we had just left behind.

“Who are these people?” I asked. “And what are they doing in this dark place?”

“They are junkies,” Kwok Sun said. “They smoke opium.”

“Where do they smoke?”

“I'll show you.”

We came to a door. It was locked. Slivers of light showed through the cracks. The heat was suffocating. The air was still. There was no wind. If there had been any, it would not have reached this part of the city.

“Knock, knock,” Kwok Sun said playfully as he knocked on the door.

The wooden door opened slowly, making a screeching noise in the process. A pungent smell met my nose. An old man with a white goatee beard appeared. He was surprised to see two kids standing before him and paused. Then he recognized Kwok Sun.

“Oh, Master Sun, it is you,” he said. “What are you doing here at this time of the night? Do you want to see your father? Come in. I shall tell him that you are here. Just wait here.”

He was obviously a gentle and kind man who knew Kwok Sun well. He turned and spoke to a man who was standing behind him. “Go and tell Dai Low that his son is here.”

The room was not large, a few hundred square feet. It was divided into two parts by a doorway threshold. A couple of rolled-up rattan blinds hung on the underside of the door frame.

The outer portion of the room was used as a reception-cum-restroom while the inner portion had long narrow beds that were lined up in a row, arranged against the walls. On each there was a straw mattress, a wooden headrest and what appeared to be a long smoking pipe placed on a specially designed stool.

The room was dimly lit and smoke-filled. Through the haziness I could see patrons, mostly men, some so skinny I could see their ribcages, lying sideways. All of them seemed to be bare-chested, lying in foetal position, heads resting on the wooden pillows smoking and puffing in a slow, gentle and lethargic manner, eyes closed as if they were in a trance, completely submerged in a state of total gratification.

It was an atmosphere of peace, quiet and tranquillity. They were in heaven. No one spoke, not even the *amah* – a servant with a long plait

– who brought towels and served tea to them. Business was brisk. I was amazed and watched in awe at the comings and goings in this new world.

“*Hung Ka Charn* (instant death to your whole family). You never fucking died before? Fuck you!” A fat man no more than forty years old with tattoos on his chest and arms appeared at the top of the staircase shouting expletives and abuse. “Why do you bring kids into this joint? You know what this is? This is a fucking black house. Where is your fucking sense? You know the rules. You have been here for longer than I can fucking remember.”

The man came storming down the staircase, charged forward and grabbed the old man by the collar of his shirt, the same man who had opened the door for us, and slapped him across the face.

“But... but... Master, this is your son. It is Kwok Sun, Sun-chai, your son... your son,” said the old man. He was badly shaken.

“*Sze-chai* (dead son), you go home. Leave right away. I shall deal with you when I am home,” the man said as he pushed Kwok Sun out of the house. I was horrified.

We left quickly. I never saw a man as fierce as Kwok Sun's father. No wonder he was the overlord of the Walled City.

GROWING PAINS

After school, Kwok Sun and I often played on the hill behind Mun Sang together with other boys who gathered there every afternoon. From the top of the hill, we could see the whole of Kai Tak airport and its surroundings. Nothing was more exciting than seeing how the planes landed while we dreamt of being pilots one day.

The planes' approaches were difficult and the margin of error for the pilots must have been narrow. As each came down through the surrounding hills dividing the peninsula of Kowloon, it had to fly at an

angle and home in on a chequer-board on top of a knoll and then bank sharply before it could head towards the runway.

The angle of the bank was sharp, at least forty-seven degrees. From the perspective above, while descending and factoring in crosswinds, the streets and buildings below seemed to rise up rapidly. It was hairy enough if the pilot had a clear line of sight to the runway while making the turn but the weather could change to cloudy, rainy or just foggy. It thrilled us to bits as we sat there and watched planes land and take off from this location.

The hillside was covered with graves and urns that were used to house exhumed human remains. According to the local custom, the bodies of the dead were buried for a while before the skeletal remains were exhumed, washed, cleaned and placed in urns. These urns were then placed on hillsides in the countryside. The urns were constantly disturbed by us boys looking for snail shells. The best and toughest of these shells, white in colour and known as '*tit kam kong*', could only be found in and among the skeletal remains, often embedded in the bottom of a half-buried urn.

To find them, the urns had to be dug out and overturned and, in the process, the contents would spill out, leaving the ancestral remains exposed or strewn all over the slope, much to the consternation of their descendants. Often we were beaten and chased off the hill by the irate families but we kept going back because the lure to find a prized shell was just too great to resist.

Owning one was an ultimate symbol of superiority. Our game involved pressing the head of one shell against another and the loser would be the shell that gave way under the force.

Once, using a catapult, I managed to shoot down a pigeon. It was fat and large.

“What shall we do with this bird?” I asked. “Why don't we make preserved meat out of the pigeon? Do you know how it is made... you know, like preserved duck and sausage? Are they cooked or are they simply left out in the sun to dry before they sell them at the shops?”

“I have a pretty good idea how preserved meat is made,” said Kwok Sun. “You look at all things preserved that are hung at the meat shop: chicken, duck, sausage, pork – you name it. They all look raw and black. I am certain it is not cooked. All we have to do is pluck the feathers, remove the intestines, clean it with water and season it by soaking it in a bowl of soybean sauce overnight. The sauce will give it that black-looking colour like we see at the shop. Then we leave it under the sun for a day or two. The sun will cook it and it will be ready for eating. Come on, it is so exciting. Let’s make our preserved pigeon. We can do it. I know we can.”

We left the carcass of the pigeon hanging from a pole on the roof of a building and waited for the sun to do the ‘roasting’ for us, going back to check on its progress whenever we found the time over the next two days. The pigeon was looking darker by the day and, although it did not exactly look like the meat we saw at the shop, it looked close enough in colour and texture.

“It should be ready to eat by tomorrow,” said Kwok Sun. “We shall each bring a bottle of Coca Cola and enjoy our lunch, our own preserved pigeon. Oh, how wonderful... I can’t wait until we come back tomorrow.”

We were both so excited by the prospect of eating our own preserved pigeon that neither Kwok Sun nor I could sleep that night.

“Yuk, the meat tastes like rubber. I can hardly chew it,” I said. “It is not like the pigeon we get at the restaurant.”

“Of course, this is the first time we have tried to preserve a pigeon and we will get better once we get the hang of it,” offered Kwok Sun. “Don’t complain. Just eat and enjoy it. Besides, we have saved the money given to us for lunch. Try getting one bite of the pigeon and mix it with a sip of Coca Cola. They blend in well. You will enjoy it.”

Even before we finished eating, I noticed something unusual in Kwok Sun’s face. It was turning blue and white and he began to sweat profusely. His hands were shaking and he was shivering. Then his face became red and swollen. Rashes began to appear. It was quite apparent that he was

allergic to something he had eaten. He threw up. Then his heart began to palpitate. It pumped harder and harder. He was on the verge of collapsing as I made a sprint for the staircase. I ran down to find help for my best friend and I soon found myself pleading with a passer-by in the street.

Kwok Sun was barely conscious when he was carried to a waiting ambulance. On the way to Kowloon Hospital on Argyle Street, I too began to develop the same symptoms – a swollen face, itchy skin and racing heartbeat. I became delirious and incoherent.

We were both hospitalized and not released for two days. The doctor told us it was more than just food poisoning. It was a chemical reaction. Our systems had reacted to what was in the pigeon we ate and we were both extremely lucky to be alive: whatever caused the inflammation had spread to our throats, causing them to swell. If we had arrived fifteen minutes later, the swelling would have blocked our windpipes and we could have suffocated.

Some time later, I noticed tiny worms in my stool and one day I dropped a tapeworm the size of an earthworm.

We soon recovered from the ordeal and went on the rampage again.

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We were Peeping Toms and one rooftop was a particular favourite of ours because from there we could look into another building block – no more than twenty feet away – which was tenanted by army families. In the heat of summer, the wives of British soldiers often walked around either scantily dressed or with no clothes on at all in their apartments with the curtains drawn back. The rooftop was where we ate ‘eyes ice cream’ when the summer heat became unbearable.

I think only the Chinese can turn an innocuous game such as kite flying into an art; not art in the visual sense but the art of fighting and an instrument for gambling. They say gambling is in the blood of the people.

“What is this?” Kwok Sun asked as he bent down and picked up what appeared to be some kind of powder from the floor when we were up on the rooftop one day. He pinched it hard between his thumb and index finger.

“Shit...” Kwok Sun shouted as he quickly dusted it off his fingers. “It cuts,” he screamed.

I took a look. His two fingers were cut and he was bleeding from the wounds. I bent down and examined the powder.

“It’s glass powder,” I said. “It’s abrasive.”

“They use the powder to murder people,” said Kwok Sun. “You know, if you mix it with food and it goes into the stomach the glass grinds and makes holes in the stomach. Then it kills.”

“No – nonsense – they use it for the kite string,” I said. “I have seen how the adults make the string lethal. They use two spools to run the string through a tin can in which there are two tiny holes – just large enough for the string to pass through. And the can is filled with liquid paste that is a mixture of glass powder and glue. The processed string is wound from one spool to another. As it moves across the spools it dries up under the sun.”

“What do they do with it?” asked Kwok Sun.

“The kite fighting season begins in autumn when the sky is high and the air crisp and breezy. The kite flyers move up to the roof. They are surrounded by spectators who are there to cheer them and often to place bets.”

“But how do these kites fight?” Kwok Sun asked again.

“The kites are made of bamboo and paper. When carried by the wind, these kites can be steered. The glass-coated string is what turns the kites into fighters. The kites swerve and swoop as they move across the sky chasing each other. At times a kite goes up from underneath like a rapidly rising sun or somersaulting down like a sinking comet to engage in combat against the other kite. When engaged, the lines in the spools are let loose and delivered into the sky as quickly as possible so that they run and cut each other until the one gives way. Everyone gets a rush of

adrenalin as the battle for survival is fought out above. Finally, the string breaks and the loser kite drifts off into the distance while the winner rises victoriously up in the evening sky. The spectators jump with excitement as they watch the aerial combat. Money then changes hands between the banker and the punters.”

“Wow! It sounds like those dogfights of fighter planes,” said Kwok Sun. “Can we do it?”

“We don’t have the money. The string, spool and kite cost a lot. Where do we get the money? But wait, I have an idea. We can hijack the kites.”

“How?”

“It’s easy. We go up to the right roof. Get in front of them. We tie a piece of small stone to one end of a string and wait until the lines of the kites that are engaged in combat drop onto us. We toss the stone upward until the lines are entangled. Then we pull our line down and bingo! We hijack the kite. It is that simple.”

“Wow... you are so clever, Robert.” Kwok Sun’s eyes brightened as he heaped praise on me. “Why don’t we do just that? It sounds so exciting.”

“But be prepared,” I said. “The kite flyer is not going to be pleased. He can beat the hell out of us – you know, they are not kids like us. They are grown-ups.”

“We can run faster than them though, can’t we?”

We waited in ambush. The sky was full of kites; many were engaged in the aerial combat. We did not have to wait long. Soon we saw two kites fighting for survival. The crossed lines were clearly visible from above as the kites disappeared into the distant sky and the lines dropped precariously close to our roof. Kwok Sun was the first to toss the stone. I followed suit. It was easy – we managed to bring both lines down. Onlookers on the neighbouring roof raised a hue and cry followed by raised arms and clenched fists amid an outburst of expletives.

“Quick, let’s wind the string into the spools before they get us,” I shouted to Kwok Sun.

“Wow... it is such a bountiful day,” shouted Kwok Sun joyfully. “There are miles and miles of lines. We can fly our own kites and dominate the sky. We will be kings—”

Even before his sentence was finished and as we were busy winding, we heard the loud noise of footsteps coming from the staircase. Two burly men appeared.

“You grab the skinny one and I’ll get the other,” one shouted.

Before we could run, we were seized from behind. We were smacked and punched.

“Lay off us, you bastard,” I screamed as I struggled. “You know who his father is? He is Dai Low, king of the Walled City. If you hurt us, his *machai* (followers) are going to get even with you... Let go, you fucking bastard.”

“I don’t care if his father is the king of Hong Kong,” shouted the man. “How dare you fucking steal our kites? Go and fucking kneel on the glass powder.”

While we knelt on the bed of glass powder the two men busied themselves with bringing the kites down – with our own spoons.

When the exercise was completed one of them picked the two of us up by the ears. “I don’t want to see either of you on this roof ever,” he shouted. “If I ever see you here again I will show you no mercy next time. I will twist off the ear from your face. Do you understand me?”

Kwok Sun and I made sure the two men had left before we dared get up again. We tried to lend each other support as we hobbled home. Our faces were bruised black and blue from the beating and our knees were cut and bleeding.

“Where have you been, Robert?” Father shouted at me. “You are late for dinner. Ah... were you fighting again? How many times have I told you not to pick fights in the street? You never listen, do you?”

Father was angry. As he spoke, he held me by the ear and hit me.

“Stop... stop,” screamed Mother as she shielded me from more onslaughts. “Can’t you see he has been beaten enough and his knees are bleeding?” Then she boiled an egg and used it to remove the swelling

on my face. She also used alcohol spirit to treat the cuts and wounds on my face and knees. That night I could hardly sleep. The pain was excruciating.

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“Robert, this is your English paper,” said Brother Wilfred of the school on Perth Street – La Salle College. “You have done well. There is only one mistake: it is ‘both friends’, not ‘both friend’, do you understand?”

“Brother Wilfred, I checked with my father,” I replied. “He told me it is ‘both friend’ without the ‘s’.”

“Go to the Potato Room,” shouted Brother Wilfred angrily. “I will show you how we deal with argumentative boys.”

The Potato Room – so-called because it was where potatoes, the staple food for the Catholic brothers that ran the school, were kept – was located outside the school grounds at the entrance to Perth Street where the brothers had their living quarters. The room had been converted from a garage which had no windows and just one door. At one end there was a rack on which canes were kept – there must have been a dozen of these canes, all different sizes, from thin to thick.

“Pick a cane,” Brother Wilfred ordered as he stormed into the room. He was old, fat and sported a long white goatee beard to compensate for his bald head. In his long white gown he looked more like a Jewish rabbi than a brother of the Catholic order. “Roll down your trousers and pants and bend over the bench.”

I picked the thinnest cane, not knowing that thinner canes were the most lethal.

He then horsewhipped me. I screamed in pain as the strokes rained down. I lost count after about twelve. My buttocks were bleeding.

“Go back to the classroom and stand on the platform,” he commanded. “Do not move until I tell you to.”

I hobbled back to the classroom and there I was humiliated again.