

Flower Lounge

noun

- 1 *archaic* a garden parlour in a stately mansion in southern China.
- 2 archaic a private salon in an exclusive brothel.
- 3 slang prison in Cantonese Triad parlance, reflecting a sense of defiance or escapism: Jail? Big deal! Just a Flower Lounge with free accommodation, three meals a day, and plenty of mates to party with.

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ONE

Leap to Hell

Broken Reality

A moment ago, this place was roiling with partying noise. Convicts were swearing and laughing over the ear-splitting broadcast. Suddenly, without transition, it's all quiet. Not exactly dead quiet, but definitely hush quiet. The only noise left is the hypnotic snoring and sporadic whispers from neighbouring cells. Cigarette smoke has also dissipated. In its place is the stench of vintage urine. I'm absolutely certain that I had been fully conscious all this time, but equally certain that I couldn't have been. Reality doesn't skip pages like this, not before today anyway.

I've been lying in bed all evening, staring at the festering ceiling, hardly blinking, so I thought. Obviously, that wasn't the case, or I couldn't have missed Radio Hong Kong at a hundred decibels being turned off. I must have dozed. Dozing off unaware happens all the time, but coming off it without transition is a new experience. My subconscious must have had spaced out to escape an impossible day. Good move. Anyway, I had evidently short-circuited, missed a chunk of space-time, sleepwalked in and out of an existential puddle.

Reality broke.

So? If it were up to me, I would have it broken, crumpled, and buried for at least the next few years anyway.

The numbness which had protected me all day is wearing off like anaesthetics. Painful little details, so far well hidden, are resurfacing. They look dreadful, flickering through my mind like street garbage flustering and colliding in a dusty vortex.

There isn't any timepiece around, but I can tell instinctually it's around midnight.

Can I still trust my instincts? And why should I bother to know what time it is?

By convention, a new day begins at midnight, a transition I had rarely noticed, but I am a little curious about whether tomorrow has arrived. Perhaps I've already served out Day One of my prison term? Can't imagine what the new day may bring, though it makes no difference. Whatever it entails, I'll have to follow orders. Absolute obedience is number one rule in jail, that much I know. I won't be able to influence the content of the days ahead. One dark day will be no different from another. Why then should I care what day it is?

All fixed. Every goddamned thing is meant to be, predestined.

Days are measured by the interactive movements of stars and planets. Splendid heavenly bodies plunge through an unlit vacuum at celestial speed to give content to time, creating the future. Awesome, right? No. Not at all. Stars and planets following their orbital fates is more mindless than a government job at the treasury. If they knew that total obliteration awaits them two light years away, in the form of a giant star ABC123, waiting patiently on a collision path for a suicidal ambush, they would charge along just the same. Like us, they can't change course at will. Every fraction of a nanometre has been fixed.

All things dead or alive follow their assigned path of destruction dutifully, knowingly, unknowingly, then puff...All zombies.

Flower Lounge Broken Reality

There's no choice in this universe. None whatsoever. Don't kid yourself. No backtracking either. From the moment of the Big Bang came eternal boredom, monotony, and precise, absolute, compliance. I have my doubts about the Big Bang theory, but that's irrelevant.

Do I sound astronomically philosophical? Who wouldn't be on his first night in jail? Plus my random thoughts are mostly common sense. Just that plain, old, simple common sense neglected long enough appears kind of philosophical. Enlightenment is a cynical side-effect of maturity, I suppose.

Anyway, the point is, everything's predetermined to the very picometer and much smaller, including what happens to my humble self, alas.

Predetermination doesn't mean predictability either. Everything that has happened today was meant to be, but nonetheless surprising. After a series of tedious surprises, I'm now an inmate in the Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre, serialised 365820.

Even here, things continue to surprise.

Hong Kong's busiest, most overused and rundown prison is drastically unlike what I would have imagined, had I actually imagined what a jailhouse is like. This dump — a notorious jailhouse which literally stinks — is a busting hellhole, irritatingly jolly. Most prisoners don't seem to mind being in jail. In my self-pitying mood, their cheerfulness infuriates. Perhaps Lai Chi Kok offers them a respite from a villainous routine? Serendipitous reunions with long lost pals are obviously welcome: *Hey! What fucking surprise! Good ta see ya, fuckhead, ha ha!* I actually heard that earlier. Friendly people.

Unexpectedly, smoking is allowed. Nearly everyone smokes within the high walls of this disciplinary compound. Fire alarms are either non-existent, out of order, or desensitised to cope with a fuming reality. As if to enhance party atmosphere, the Department of Correctional Services turns the loudspeakers way up. Inmates have to yell at full force over the din to swear at each other. Clashing sound waves laced with tobacco smell bounced off musty cell walls, bombarding my brittle consciousness until...until it broke.

Did it really break? When?

As the stench of cigarettes peters out, vintage ammonia takes over. It's not as pungent as fresh pee, but the aftertaste lingers. I can picture viscous legs crawling inside my nasal cavity. The elevated toilet roared and splashed wildly when I pulled the tacky string earlier, sending a mini-tsunami onto the bare concrete platform. A penetrating miasma emanates from its damp surface. Generations of inmates have either aimed poorly, or not bothered. Well, why should they? Luckily, as a veteran sewage engineer, I know from experience that nothing stinks for long, not even this. The nose adapts much faster than the brain; it doesn't think.

Whoever installed a raised squat toilet above the bed must have been sick. I can understand the need to avoid blind spots in prisons, and that convicts are not in a position to demand privacy. But an open toilet on ground level would have met the requirement. Why put us on stage? Plus twenty-first century urbanites have long evolved beyond climbing big steps and squatting deeply. Good thing I practice yoga once a week. My deep squats are creaky, but adequate for the present purpose.

Flower Lounge Broken Reality

I'm rambling hyperactively. Perhaps it's a self-distraction tactic. Can't do that for long, I know, but I seriously don't feel like facing reality right now. Looking back at past events is another story though. Digging for regretful moments is utterly pointless, worse than facing the here and now, but I can't help it.

Lying on a fibreglass bed ineffectively cushioned by prickly military blankets, staring at the ugly ceiling, I keep drifting back in time, searching for a reason, any acceptable excuse, for this — my being locked up in this slammer. The mind wants a postmortem on the past to show how things could have been different with great hindsight and retrospective wisdom. What for? To backdate regrets? To identify some critical event to which I can point a finger? Here, see that? Next time, do this differently, more wisely, and everything will be okay.

Sure.

Next time? Is *next time* still possible?

Of course, and anything possible may happen again and again *ad infinitum*, at least in theory. Shit.

But as I stare into the past, everything looks fixed.

Each instant is the ineluctable consequence of a preceding one, and uncompromising precursor of the next. Negligible nanoseconds link up seamlessly into hours, days, weeks, years, chaining up events, leaving no room for alternatives, not even in retrospect. Nobody can interrupt the cascade more than one could slice a waterfall into halves with a sword. Like an asteroid, I follow my destined orbit because that's the only option, and here I am.

If I could relive the past, I would most likely repeat everything I've done. It was the most mindlessly natural or mindfully sensible thing to do at the time. Rather futile in hindsight, of course. Given enough time, all sensible and natural actions eventually look futile, if not exactly stupid. Contriving a different path would just be a different *meant-to-be*, an alternative to the present trajectory which doesn't guarantee improvement. Forcing events down another uncharted course would also open the possibility of a *worse* outcome, however unthinkable that prospect may seem right now.

So, all meant to be. I'm a diehard victim of predetermination based on pseudo-logical deduction and common sense, nothing philosophical about it at all.

But the egotistical mind refuses to accept destiny. It wants to show that rationality still exists, that life's vagaries are governed by a consistent cause-and-consequence relationship. Otherwise, hope may vanish. I don't wish to lose hope, not so soon anyway. Everyone says 'don't lose hope when facing adversities'; no matter how I look at it, I'm facing mega adversities.

What everyone says is usually wrong though. Much smarter sages east and west had unequivocally warned against this popular cliche. Buddhists and Daoists warn that hope is the illusive vanguard of disappointment. Less hope, less cry. No hope, no cry. The Stoics (do they still exist?) believe that hope distracts us from living the moment.

Ah, but what if I'm not particularly impressed with the moment, and don't mind not living it at all?

Nothing makes sense anymore, least of all the what ifs.

Flower Lounge Broken Reality

How could I have changed any moment before it existed? If I could, I would have deleted today—the 29th of February, 2012, and emptied the trash bin.

But I can't. In fact, being a leap day makes it nearly impossible to forget.

* * *

Leap Day Verdict

Staring at the speckled ceiling, I don't feel one bit tired, all the more certain that I had not dozed off earlier.

The events of today keep replaying again and again in my head like a broken record.

I'm rarely insomniac. Staying awake all night shivering over potential disasters would only result in puffy eyes and fuddled reasoning, not solutions. I'd rather snore on my problems. Hey, nasty issues might just evaporate overnight; we never know what friendly forces could be at play while we sleep. In any event, a well-rested mind is more likely to dream of a way out of dire straights, or face it with dignity.

Though troubles don't stop me from falling asleep, I tend to wake up early when troubled — the bigger the trouble, the earlier I wake. This behavioural pattern hasn't changed after retirement, though bad news has become less frequent.

This morning, I woke before five, about two hours earlier than usual, an indication of the size of the looming distress. Couldn't get back to sleep after tossing and turning for ten minutes, so I went to the terrace for a bit of fresh morning air and a quiet moment — both precious commodities in Hong Kong. The translucent sky was cloudless, but clearly unpenetrable. Without any logical connection, I took that as an auspicious sign that my nightmare was about to end. In any event, a decision had no doubt been made by then. The outcome had been set in court documents duly prepared, filed, printed, photocopied, probably a few days before. Wishful thinking may not affect the outcome, but helped make the moment more reassuring.

Might as well catch a relaxing moment before too late. In this town, we have to rush to relax. Irritated vehicles will soon appear, honking contemptuously at each other, poised to explode from vexation. Everyone would be impatient to move on, to go somewhere, anywhere, right away. And everyone else would be in the way.

A few meters away, the bulbul couple twittered happily, resting, digesting wriggly worm carpaccio.

They were born in this terrace. The birth nest on the white jade orchid had long been abandoned, but they continue to visit daily just as their forebears had for generations. We know each other. I can get quite close to them, though not close enough to offer my finger for perching, or invite them into the house like Asa did. Asa was the Indian coach of the squash club I belonged to in the 1980s. He lived in a room at the rooftop of the club building, and wild birds would enter his tiny home through the windows to hop or fly around. If I stayed quiet and still when visiting, they would stay. It was surreal, absolutely enchanting. When the club closed

down, As a moved to an outlying island. I saw him once since then. He told me the birds had moved with him over there, but I never managed to visit his new home as promised. I was going through an overtime phase. The ferries ran infrequently. I could't fly, and was not as loyal to friendship as the birds evidently were.

Much more recently, a friend in Chongqing bought a sun parakeet from the market. She has no training in biology or bird psychology, but managed to toilet train the little green bird. Amazingly, it would flitter from its open cage to drop uric acid composite on a cotton pad labelled Bird Toilet. More amazingly, she has subsequently repeated the success with a second purchase from the market. Triply amazingly, she now takes the birds to the park to fly. When they have had enough of nature, they'd return to their cosy cage and whistle all the way home. I have not met and examined these birds in person, but have seen many proud photos and videos on my friend's social media.

Humans understand very little about animals. Perhaps there's more to the saying 'a little bird told me' than modern folks know? The fact that bears can smell something fishy twenty kilometres away cannot be simplemindedly rationalised in molecular terms. In fact, we know very little about ourselves as well. *Homo sapiens* are supposedly clever and knowledgeable according to self-assessment, but most of what we know are wild guesses or cosmic fudge factors, like dark matters in space, for example.

Anyway, I'm no bird whisperer, and these bulbuls are ordinary and nervous. The slightest jerky movement from me would send them fleeting.

'Hey, little birds,' I said stupidly. I normally deride people who talk to animals in a human language, but today is an exceptional occasion. 'Tell me what you know, anything.'

Their twitter sounded spirited and encouraging. Perhaps that's how bad news sound in bulbul songs? In another half a day, I would also encounter many happy jail birds. Maybe the bulbuls were trying to tell me *Hey, there's a great Triad party tonight in jail, have fun!* Too bad I couldn't decode the message at the time. 'Wish me luck,' I added wishfully instead, then whistled their favourite routine. They cocked their heads and looked puzzled like birds always do.

Just then, Satu came out, phone in hand, obviously in distress.

'What's the matter?'

The birds leapt off and disappeared into the concrete jungle. Cowards.

'Leslie...' she burst into tears.

That was my first terrible news today.

For nearly three long years, my sister-in-law Leslie combated cancer while I fought the government. About three weeks ago, my battlefield went quiet. The endless hearings stopped. The good judge retreated from his bench to contemplate for an unspecified period. Meanwhile, Leslie was admitted to the hospital. Silent worries hummed in the background.

Last week, she suddenly showed flashbacks which seemed at once hopeful and portentous. Friends and families told her and each other how miraculously better she looked, smiling

sunshine, nodding emphatically. We were probably lying or wishful thinking. What else could we have said though? 'Hey, everyone, don't get too excited, Leslie is just experiencing terminal lucidity'?

On our final visit a few days ago, the dilemma was gone.

Her condition had plummeted overnight, reduced to a singleminded struggle for air from the oxygen mask. The machine was hissing a relentless countdown, leaving no room for positive thinking. Subconsciously, I synchronised my breathing with the machine's morbid rhythm. Breathing is one of many critically important things in life that we take for granted. The average person breathes about twenty thousand cycles a day. If one gets stuck, that's it. Yet he hardly notices.

Death would be a relief now, I thought, then immediately felt guilty for having had such an honest thought. *Don't lose hope!* I hastily covered it with contrived positivity. Hope meant nothing to Leslie anymore, but would anaesthetise us against the looming loss, though sustaining unrealistic hope is tiring.

Three long years. Leslie must have been tired also.

After my parents died, she had been organising all major eating-and-drinking family events. Without her, me and my five siblings would have been far too lazy to see each other. Though frail, capable Leslie had been reasonably healthy until doctors discovered malignant cells in a regular checkup.

As she went through chemo, many questions popped up in my mind.

Had the tumour remained undiscovered and unprovoked, would it have continued to co-exist with Leslie in peace? Or eventually wilted, gotten reabsorbed or digested? I know nothing about the mysterious life force driving my fleshy shell with a dark and slimy interior. Neither do doctors, though they pretend they do. I also know nothing at all about death, except that I'm merely raw material for a future corpse. Had Leslie stayed away from the vicious cytotoxic agents, would she have recovered unknowingly? Or died without drawn-out pain?

She had doubted the treatment process as it killed her cell by cell — good ones, bad ones, ugly ones, innocent ones. It didn't look right, and felt horrible. What would be left when all the cells are gone?

Modern medical practice is like a self-driving car speeding down a signless highway. The destination seems clear and simple — get rid of those damned renegade cells. How to get there? Press the button. Follow the protocol. The programme knows where to go and what to do next. Doctors have been turned into mechanics. To the passenger, things look increasingly blurry outside as she hands her life over to the protocol — the same protocol for all ages and genders and constitutions as long as the symptoms and diagnosis are similar. Deviation is unethical, even criminal, definitely uninsured. Don't you dare.

Alternative treatments appeared like curious turnoffs. Would that work? Uh...

Too late. As she weighed these options, they retreated in the rearview mirror. Matters of life and death allow no hesitation. The main road was full of unknowns, but official. Turning off

into an *unconventional* unknown was not covered by insurance. Following the protocol would at least clear her from personal responsibilities in the event of death.

As I write this, I have also been diagnosed with stomach cancer myself, and finally decided to opt for herbal treatment and give self-heal a chance. I have therefore experienced, am still experiencing, Leslie's dilemma first hand. In order to live, we must risk death.

It's only six thirty. A long day ahead.

'Should we light an incense?'

Satu nodded.

Smoke billowed skywards, bracing a light breeze, trying to catch up with Leslie with our farewell wishes.

My mind drifted: Death, the only absolute certainty in life, is infamously unpredictable. Bureaucratic justice, on the other hand, though tedious and peculiar, operates within rigid boundaries, following due process. Thankfully, it has finally run out of steam. There is no more solemn non-event to repeat. The fiasco will end in about two hours.....Bring down the curtain.

Classical wishful thinking.

Was I being deliberately naive? For I had been warned. Derek had unequivocally cautioned against optimism. Having worked with him for more than two years, I had learned to enjoy his cynicism, and take his unremitting cautions as something that solicitors do for a living. A couple of days ago, when he notified me that judgement will be handed down today, the 29th, and repeated the same trite warning, I yawned.

Judgements have to be handed down because judges are perched upon elevated benches. The higher the court, the higher the bench. Awaiting judgement down below is humbling and suspenseful. Nobody knows when Mr. Justice is ready to download stuff. There is no official deadline. He alone decides how long it should take to decide. When he eventually does, he wouldn't give much advance notice. Why bother? Defendants have no choice. They are in effect criminals in waiting, denied many basic rights and courtesies. The remanded are even locked up — therefore life ruined for many — while remaining theoretically 'innocent until proven guilty'. All the lawyers I have questioned about this widely advertised legal principle gave me a similar shrug: 'Ha, well, in theory, yes. But, uh, yes, in theory, of course.' It reeks of hypocrisy, but my pragmatic side actually appreciates the need to balance common sense and theory in the real world of criminal justice.

Colonial legacy divides Hong Kong lawyers into two castes — solicitors, and barristers aka counsels. Each class is stratified into permanent 'expatriates' who might have lived and worked in Hong Kong most of their lives, and the natives. As my pre-retirement employer was a joint venture between an old British *Hong* and a French multinational (let's call it *the Company* with a capital C from now on), our legal team comprised all English-only lawyers with a few also-Chinese-speaking local assistants.

Solicitors work in offices. Counsels work in *chambers* which look exactly like offices. Solicitors don't wear wigs — not the white and curly kind anyway — or gowns like barristers

do, and normally not permitted to speak directly to the judge whom everyone addresses Your Honour or My Lord with a gentle bow of the head. A solicitor's main job is to explain legal obscurities to uninformed clients on a need-to-know basis, and to extract worthy information from them for a barrister's rumination and strategic design. Barristers don't deal directly with clients but for investigative interviews and mock interrogations. Even their hefty bills are presented and settled through solicitors.

Working closely with my defence team for a couple of years allowed me to make some general observations about lawyers — the face and hands in the judicial clockwork.

Firstly, none of the law boys I have chatted with care about justice more than undertakers care about the dead. Law is a job, an income generator, nothing to do with social or moral principles. Cynical? Perhaps, but understandable, even inevitable. Some — the ones *the Company* employed anyway — were highly intelligent, but their clever minds were peculiar. For example, the assistant barrister was an effective and clever young native, a great research asset in our team. Over lunch one day, however, his anecdotal explanation of the technicality of theft shocked me. He explained that had I stolen a hundred bucks from someone, spent it on ice cream, then regretfully snuck a hundred back into his wallet, I would still have committed theft. Okay, got that. A wrong action can't be undone. But had I returned the same hundred-dollar bill, I would not have committed a crime, technically speaking.

The logic was alarming. Was he trying to be funny? I squinted to examine him for a second: A proud professional trying to explain his sacred trade to an ignorant outsider. He was dead serious, not facetious.

Secondly, lawyers are professionally ambiguous. When asked by an anxious client what his chances are, the barrister would turn to stare outside the window — hmm, not my business — leaving the solicitor to calm him with universal wisdom: 'Uh, I'd say fifty-fifty. Your case is tricky, really hard to say. Best to refrain from wishful thinking. Be prepared for the worst, you know. Yet, you're in good hands. Nothing's impossible.' He may then add an afterthought: 'Worst comes to worst, well, we may have to face additional costs.' This is when word-perfect lawyers tend to confuse pronouns. His we definitely does not include his good self or esteemed firm.

All that may sound cynical. Reality often does. But my barrister, an equable elderly Queen's Counsel from New Zealand, was an exception.

Don't think he had actually defended the Queen in court, but had done a good job imitating the way she spoke. Dropping one's natural accent to sound snobbish is odd and disingenuous from my Chinese perspective, suggesting perfidy, but he quickly overcame my prejudice and became one of a very few lawyers whom I trusted and respected. His acute analyses and calmly disarming court manners, loaded with strategic intents, instilled confidence. He also shared one of my favourite books *The Grapes of Wrath*.

He made the rare move of sending me a brief personal email the day before judgement day: 'You'll be acquitted tomorrow if justice still has meaning.' I was grateful for his reassuring prognosis and exceptional display of personal feelings, though his well-intended message unduly raised my optimism even further, and filled me with dangerous hope.

Anticipating a favourable verdict, I planned to celebrate the end of my slo-mo ordeal with friends and families who had been showing up in numbers, filling the last few hearings with hush-hush greetings, hugs, and surprise whispers.

Oh my God! He's at university? Last time he was only this tall.

We must get together more often!

They lent the ambience of a grandparent's funeral to the courtroom, until the marshal announced the judge's colourful arrival with as much pomp and solemnity a lowly paid public servant could muster in English: 'Coo...ourt!'

Let's go get drunk after the verdict, dear friends and families!

I might have tempted fate, but I had extremely strong reasons to be optimistic rather than superstitious.

I'm a typical engineer — cautiously optimistic, accepting risks to be unavoidable, always prepared for contingencies. Some have labelled me 'cynical' because they can't distinguish realism from cynicism, but nobody has ever called me a wishful thinker. Yet, throughout the trial, I had been uncharacteristically sanguine. In my mind, acquittal was the only possible outcome to this dumbfounding trial.

Of course I knew that common sense was rare. With due respect, I also expected judges to be insular beings with multiple fragilities and personality faults. Decades of managing engineering contracts had also taught me that *reasonableness* is subjective, even delusive. The human world comprises multiple shades of grey, shifting according to self-interest. Nonetheless, I strongly believed in an instinctual sense of *reasonableness* among humans, however vague it may be. Without *that* as foundation, human societies might just collapse; no contract or agreement can possibly cover every possibility, no matter how wordy. It's that critical, seriously. It underscores *Homo sapiens*' viability as a social species.

In my *reasonable judgement*, our case is so fundamentally clear-cut it leaves no room for misjudgement. Having linked my judiciary fate to the future of mankind, I felt assured and confident. Plus the alleged offence was committed outside Hong Kong's jurisdiction, so, there you go. I regarded myself legally, morally, judicially, and anthropologically protected. Local bureaucrats had fabricated a case out of thin air to keep in-boxes full and employment contracts renewed, that's all.

However...

'Perhaps we should cancel the booking?' I interrupted Satu's meditation over pale blue smoke twirling in an imperceptible breeze. 'Doesn't seem right to party anymore.'

'Let's think about that later.' Difficult decision.

'It shouldn't be long according to Derek.'

'Breakfast?'

'Sure.'

Good thing that I ate. It was to be my last meal of the day.

It's late morning. John and I are inside the dock, a cage for presumably innocent defendants. Throughout the trial, we were kindly permitted to sit at the gallery, probably because we wore nice suits and expensive ties. Today, things are more formal. When we arrived, the duty guard from the Correctional Services Department (CSD) checked our IDs, then asked us to enter the cage. He came in after us, sat by the entrance, and pulled the door shut with a clank. The gallery is packed. Late comers have to stand. Collective whispers sound like a drain pipe in a soft rain. Those who catch our eyes make encouraging gestures.

John, the First Defendant in the present trial, is an old-school Briton a few years my senior, my predecessor at *the Company* from which I retired as Director and General Manager four years ago in 2008. When I took over, he had gone to work for the French shareholder. That didn't last long; Anglo-French cooperations seldom do. They seem to me two cultural siblings with similar background and aspiration stuck in very different self-image, secretly admiring and loathing the way each other appears to be. But John was very experienced in the solid waste business, and one of the most meticulous workers I knew, so I retained him as Special Project Director at *the Company* level, chiefly responsible for tender management, and Macau where he had a long history and great personal connections. Who could have guessed that dreamy Macau would one day turn into this nightmare?

'Coo...ourt!'

The learned judge looks fancy today, donning a yellowish springy peruke, looking like an emoji. The gallery quiets down. Everyone stands.

I childishly admire his wig again to distract myself from mouth-drying anticipation. Does he powder it to hide the funk like people did in the old days, or take it to the neighbourhood dry cleaner instead? A historian friend told me that the perukes became fashionable because of syphilis, a hair-losing disease common among licentious gentlemen with high stations and low judgement. Soon, they all wore wigs whether or not they had sexy bald spots to confuse the public. But donning animal hair once used to whisk flies off the natural owner's butt in this climate seems crazy. I've also been told that judges and barristers never wash their wigs. The faint stain of tropical sweat accumulated over the years are status symbols in their business.

His Honour keeps his head down, lifting his eyes halfway to acknowledge the gallery's greeting, then sits down behind his elevated bench. He proceeds immediately to look busy with the papers before him, avoiding eye-contact with anyone.

After a brief moment of obligatory suspense, he recaps a few salient points about the case unceremoniously, reading from a prepared sheet. He sums up the lengthy trial in five minutes; I could have done that in three. In conclusion, he says he finds the accomplice witness *compelling*.

What?!

Who?

He's the one and only witness in the trial — an accomplice witness for that matter.

He's one of a few convicted persons in Macau's unprecedented corruption scandal who isn't a family member of the phenomenally corrupt ex-Secretary for Transport and Public Works Mr. Ao Man Long.

He's the person who admitted to this court when cross-examined, to this very judge sitting up there, to having previously lied four times under oath.

He's someone who sent a letter (Yes, Your Honour, in black and white, incredible isn't it? The letter you read carefully and admitted as an Exhibit, remember? Where is it now?) from his cell in a Macau prison to extort money from *the Company*. 'Otherwise,' he threatened without mincing words. 'I promise there'll be trouble.' *The Company* refused. Two days later, *coincidentally*, he reported to Hong Kong's work-hungry anti-corruption agency, the ICAC.

The judge just pronounced this witness *compelling* because 'he freely admitted to having lied on multiple occasions. That tells me he's now telling the truth.'

The gallery gasps.

I swallow saliva, or air.

The extortion letter is not mentioned. A minor detail. File lost?

Logic is subjective and personal, but — only to a certain extent, right?

Nope.

Goddammit, Derek's right.

A while ago, Derek and I went through some glaringly contradictory statements the witness had previously made to the Macanese anti-corruption agency and law courts at various levels. These official testimonials, most of them made under oath, explicitly contradicted each other, as well as the most recent version he had given to the Hong Kong court. He seemed prolifically imaginative and grievously amnesiac, recalling irreconcilable stories each time he was interrogated or cross-examined.

I expressed relief. Nobody — hey, nobody! — would rely on a witness like him. Without him, there'll be no case at all.

Derek begged to differ, as usual.

From experience, he said, someone may coach him to admit immediately to having lied when questioned, in order to deflect attacks on his credibility and gain the judge's confidence.

'What?' I blurted. 'Now, Derek, don't be ridiculous. That's too cynical even for me. Is your lawyer clock ticking? I'm not paying for this one.'

'Well, let's hope I'm wrong,' he laughed.

'I know you are.'

But that is exactly what the judge just said, nearly verbatim of Derek's ridiculous concern, before a full gallery. It has been duly transcribed for the archive, to be made Googleable in due course.

My head reels. I don't know what to think, but faintly realise that thinking is pointless under the circumstances.

I instinctively entered emergency mode: Focus on blanking out the moment.

Satu breaks down sobbing. I wave, then raise a first - Hey, be strong! Am I still qualified to be supportive?

The gallery appears more dumbfounded than I am. In an email a few days earlier, I cheekily asked a few friends to 'come celebrate with us, or see me off.'

A few wave at me but I can't make out who they are.

I turn to John. Oh no, he looks dead.

After the English judge has given his verdict, the attendant gaoler rouses from his daydream and confirms with me in Cantonese: 'No good for you guys, right?'

I nod.

He remains affable, but a tad more authoritative.

A colleague of his enters through the backdoor without knocking. I hadn't noticed there's a hidden doorway inside the cage. They escort us backstage, and put a pair of handcuffs on John and I, one loop each.

Mine's too tight.

'Can it be loosened a bit?'

'Sure.' He removes an inner shim, then closes the loop.

I thank him, then add: 'Ah Sir.' In their hands now, better be respectful.

We take a lift down to the basement.

Once underground, they remove the cuffs. All that for a fifteen-second elevator ride? I suppose it serves a psychological purpose. John and I have made the transition from being defendants to convicts awaiting sentencing.

We are sent to separate cubicles, a little bigger than clothing store fitting rooms.

An officer wearing tight surgical gloves gives clear and simple orders: 'Remove all your clothes. Empty the pockets. Spread the contents out on the table.'

I promptly obey.

'Hands on the wall. Spread your legs.'

Oh no.

I fixed my gaze on a dirt spot on the wall. There are quite a few.

Is that an ancient snot smear with dried blood?

Nothing happens.

Another long moment. Bated breath. Still nothing.

The relevant muscles relax a little. Is he conducting a visual inspection at arm's length? Or texting his wife behind my back?

'Put your clothes back on,' he orders.

'Thank you, Ah Sir.' I let out an imperceptible sigh of relief, feeling nearly happy.

Exiting the tiny room, I feel giddy, as if rousing from general anaesthetics.

'Keep to the wall,' another officer takes over, directing me from behind. The place is packed with screws. Many look dazed as they roam about, looking aimless, probably from carbohydrate overdose at lunch. My colleagues from Paris would commission a huge team of consultants to study streamlining and reorganisation options.

Why must we walk along the wall? I wonder.

Better stop asking why from now on. Just listen, obey, observe, and shut up.

We turn left at the end of the wall into a long corridor. Cells on both sides. The guard overtakes me and stands wordlessly beside an empty one. His expressionless face tells me he's either distracted by other thoughts, or bored. I walk in, assuming that's what he wants me to do. He closes the gate — clank — then saunters away without double checking if the gate has been properly closed. From the time he takes charge of me, he hasn't looked me in the eyes once. He doesn't care, the message is clear, but doesn't seem belligerent either. I stare at his back until he turns the corner. His indifference seems deliberate.

Later on, I'll discover that his mannerism is industry standard. Not hostile, not friendly, as little human interaction as possible, nothing personal. I suppose that's a sensible way to spend time with a bunch of criminals 24/7. Right this moment, however, I'm yet to register what has just happened to me, fully and thoroughly befuddled, definitely not in the mood for analyses.

My room — cell — is quite sizeable, about seven to eight square metres, brightly lit, sparsely furnished, reasonably clean. At the far right corner is a squat toilet on an elevated platform, a mini stage. People with performance anxiety will prefer constipation. Next to the entrance is a tiny dull grey fibreglass stand. On it is a translucent plastic mug covered by a thick slab of white bread. I lift the bread to investigate. Gruel — soybean gruel! Concentration camp gruel! I love soybean derivatives but detest the beans themselves. Try a little bit anyway. Yuck. Medium rare beans in lukewarm diluted brine. What if this is all I'll get in the years to come? My heart sinks.

Through two layers of steel bars, across the narrow corridor, barely a few metres away, my neighbour squats over his elevated toilet with head down, making audible efforts. I'm not fastidious, but decide to skip my first prison lunch.

I sit down in front of the stand, facing inside to give the guy nominal privacy, and blank out. My fingers feel icy.

Later — half an hour? — the tacitum guard reappears. Silently, he unlocks and opens the gate. Silently, I follow him to the elevator. John's already there, waiting to share his handcuff with me. He's never late.

The air in the packed gallery seems thicker, more difficult to breathe. Satu looks calmer. I give her my best smile. Strength and resignation, alas.

The learned judge looks less sombre. Must have had a good lunch. He announces without looking up that he's 'sentencing with a heavy heart', probably paving his way for a stiff

decompression drink after this unpleasant task. He once had his membership suspended by the Cricket Club — where most members don't play or watch cricket and John is a senior member — for an alcohol related misdemeanour. In Hong Kong's tight and tiny British circle, gossips travel at the speed of sound. Would the honourable judge be...No! Absolutely impossible. Just the thought constitutes contempt of court, stop right there...

Listen!

As I daydream anecdotally about His Honour, he compliments us!

'They have been exemplary citizens, and are leaders in their profession. It's clear that they did not seek personal gains from the crime.'

With due humility, I wholeheartedly agree with him. Nice of him to clarify publicly for the record though. I wish I could reciprocate honestly with some nice thoughts. There's a sober sense of absurdity in his speech. He must have grown up watching Monty Python.

Maybe he'll acquit us in his next breath, then apologise for the prank? Ha ha.

After beating around the court with apologetic niceties, he finally comes to the sentencing. He starts with four years, much shorter than Derek's scaremongering estimate. 'If you guys are convicted, which is quite unlikely, it'll be five to seven years *minimum* because of the amount involved,' he said, equivocally stating a matter of fact with due emphasis on *minimum*.

'A minimum of five to seven is redundant, Derek, you're a lawyer,' I corrected him. 'Just say a minimum of five.'

Thankfully, John and I have been nice guys — *exemplary* in His Honour's esteemed opinion. Furthermore, the judge adds with heightened compassion that we have suffered undue distress during the drawn-out process. (So, he noticed too!) Putting these factors together, he hereby mitigates our sentence by nine months. Not bad. Bureaucratic inefficiency isn't all bad. What's four years less nine months? Thirty nine months. If I refrain from dangerous drugs, vicious fights, and sexual assaults, there'll be a further discount.

The big black ugly van with grilled windows and gruff suspension is about to exit the basement carpark.

A guard hands John and I each a face mask. 'Journalists outside,' he warns.

Unlike ICAC agents and DOJ prosecutors who overtly smooch to journalists in the courtroom, handing out *readily usable* Press Releases with big fawning smiles, CSD officers don't care for media attention. I take mine, thank him, and translate for John who can't understand Cantonese after having lived and worked here for a quarter of a century. He's finally been given one of the most effective and forceful opportunities to learn the native language.

The gate rolls open. A swarm of reporters flickers against a screen of sunlight, pushing cameras against caged windows.

Journalists are like flies, constantly in search of steamy ordure for a living. Are we their *poo poo du jour*? Our boring case doesn't involve intricate plots or sex or violence. It's hardly newsworthy. Why the excitement? Because it's an unprecedented conviction of extra-territorial bribery by a reputable old British *Hong*? It's a landmark case. The ICAC has opened up a new

horizon. It can now extend its arm well beyond Hong Kong's tiny boundaries. Its 'business development manager', whatever his official title is, must be high-fiving his colleagues right now. Tomorrow, he would revise his annual budget and business projection. Many anti-corruption officers are on a renewable two-year contract partly because their predecessors had done an excellent job, and greatly reduced demand for their professional talents. What unfortunate irony. The men and women handling our case can now count on renewing their contracts. They know we will appeal for sure, and that may take years. Steady business.

John doubles over to bury his face between his knees, as if expecting a plane crash. Bent by desperation, he reveals a talent in yoga.

I stare straight at them instead, fascinated by the perplexing frenzy.

Go ahead. Can't change my pose though. Locked in here. Sorry.

With a little gas, the vintage vehicle wallows onto Queensway, leaving the predatory foot-soldiers of the *free-press* behind to review hastily snapped shots on camera monitors. The outside world looks strange to me, as usual. A tram trundles past, rumbling dreamily, defying urban anxiety as it has done for more than a century. The Admiralty subway station looks unreal, deserted.

Half an hour later, we arrive at the Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre on Butterfly Valley Road, adjacent to Mei Foo — Hong Kong's first mega housing estate by a private developer. When a kid, father had especially taken me here for a visit. A novelty back then, it now looks antiquated, just as ugly.

Derek had met with me briefly in the basement after the sentencing.

'The legal team opines that the judge has erred on numerous points,' he assured me with a beam, using lawyer words. 'The company has already instructed us to prepare the appeal application immediately.'

Has he, like the ICAC, included us in his annual budget, even the next five-year-plan? Our 50:50 chance event is turning out more sustainably profitable than initially expected. It'd be only prudent to revise the financial projection accordingly.

He noted as an aside before departing: 'Oh, by the way, Lai Chi Kok is a leftover dungeon, the worst hellhole in Hong Kong.'

I looked at him blankly. Is he trying to be funny?

But he appeared earnest, probably with the good intention of preparing me for the worst. He has been most consistent and perspicacious in foreseeing the worst possible outcome for more than two years though.

'Thanks, Derek,' I said. 'Thank you very much.'

He didn't seem to have detected any sarcasm.

* * *

Hellhole

It's puzzling how butterflies get to symbolise love and freedom.

Simply can't associate the flighty insect trembling in even a modest breeze with the indestructible Steve McQueen in *Papillon*. As for the *Butterfly Lovers*, they should stay inside the tomb in a private and secured ossified embrace if they truly love and enjoy each other. Instead, they transmogrify into powdery butterflies and venture outside. What for? To look pretty in the eyes of wasps and ants and rats and frogs which see them as mere snacks? For a two-week honey-half-moon if they don't bump into a hungry bird perching right next to the opening tomb? But regardless of my impression of the pathetic insect, it's an undeniable fact that they have survived an everything-may-eat-butterflies world for many million years, gradually becoming a love and liberty icon.

As our wheeled cage turns into the narrow Butterfly Valley Road, Hong Kong's worst hellhole looms at the dead end, bluntly highlighting a stark sense of irony.

The heavily fenced complex appears gloomy and weary, probably never been renovated since opening in the 1970s. To refurbish a restaurant without closing it down is challenging enough. To facelift a busy jailhouse must be practically impossible. Plus a new paint job may spoil the image of a celebrated dungeon.

All prisoners on remand, the newly convicted, as well as serving inmates transferring between Hong Kong's thirty-plus jailing institutions to and from hospitals, courthouses and other destinations are first gathered here for processing and re-distribution. It's the central jailbird exchange — a bustling hellhole.

Suspects are usually remanded for two reasons: The dangerous nature of their alleged crime, or inability to post bail. The latter is far more common. Poverty and imprisonment go back a long way. In the old days, suspects bribed magistrates and jail-guards directly. In modern times, they bribe the system with bails. The pivotal role of money in justice hasn't changed, just becoming more open and transparent, therefore invisible to most.

To the remanded, LCK is in theory purgatory, not full-fledged hell. But suspects could remain suspiciously innocent for a long time. The average trial in the lower courts lasts nearly a year. In more complicated cases, it could be more than two. I now have personal experience moonwalking through the timeless landscape of a magistrate's work life.

Remanded inmates are technically not yet guilty. They enjoy a higher degree of freedom. More precisely, they suffer a lower degree of restraint. They can keep their hairstyle, and are permitted authorised food and cigarettes brought by visitors. They are also not assigned chores

to kill unwanted time. Their uniforms are a hopeless grey instead of shitty brown like those worn by ordained cons. That's about it. Otherwise, they are prisoners in style and substance, getting roasted at nominally lower temperature. Whether it makes a difference being grilled at 800C or incinerated at above 1200C — dioxin-free — depends on personal perception.

Luckily, most remanded would not end up feeling unjustly aggrieved, as the conviction rates are high. Statistics tells us acquittal is rare for inmates on remand, especially those represented by Legal Aid. In private, legal professionals seem to agree that the principle of *innocent until proven guilty* doesn't exist in practice. 'Legal principles with sporadic Latin words are like election slogans — not to be taken seriously.' So what if one were miraculously exonerated after spending a year at LCK. To the hand-to-mouth class, it means joblessness, disrepute regardless of verdict, even a shattered home deserted by a hungry wife. Eventual discharge only delivers them from purgatory to a wrecked heaven — cold, cloudy, desolate.

John and I are trucked straight to LCK from court for assessment, categorisation, and onward dispatch to one of the slammers. Upon arrival, someone unlocks the cuffs and leaves us alone without further instruction.

I join other new arrivals, lumbering along until reaching the registration desk.

'Name!' The officer lifts his eyes without moving his head, then returns them to the big thick registry opened before him.

I answer dutifully.

'Offence?' he asks the registry, but I assume he wants an answer from me.

'Eh, ICAC...' It's a long story. To properly explain my offence takes time.

The officer understands my technically incorrect answer and interrupts me before I continue. 'Where did you sleep last night?'

'Pardon me?'

I don't mean to withhold the information — at home of course, in my bed — but am momentarily confused by the odd question.

'Move on.'

He's in no mood to entertain ignorance, and evidently good at guessing answers. He writes something down. I wonder what it is. Not many civil servants have retained his efficient nonnesense style since Her Majesty's administrators went home in 1997. Government workers these days tend to have neither temper or authority, or purpose.

I move on as instructed, shuffling along with the seemingly erratic flow.

Had I imagined a prison setting before, I might have pictured a dim hall packed with downcast men listening to the echoes of a leaky tap. This waiting room reminds me of the first day of school after summer break instead, though convicts are even more exuberant and foulmouthed than teenage boys. Greetings and conversations are predominantly expletives, with little content in between. Phrases designed to insult and provoke are used to facilitate bonding. Old pals, busy with their own criminal activities, had not met up for a while. What a pleasant surprise, though not really a surprise...to run into each other at LCK.

Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai — Fuck your mother's! Thought I'd fucking bump into you here! Where the fuck else huh?

Dew Lay Lo Mo! You won't fucking believe where I've fucking been man...fuck fuck!

Mother-fucking greetings charge the reception hall with friendship and nostalgia and excitement. Many appear thrilled to be back. Perhaps they are indeed happy to be taking a break from the small dark world out there, in the relative safety of a correctional institution?

An officer looks up from his work and shrieks: 'Dew Lay Lo Mo!' Be quiet!'

Everyone quiets down for a face-giving minute, then resumes spontaneously.

The officer carries on with his task as if he hasn't noticed the relapse, or has changed his mind about demanding silence.

Following the man in front of me, I end up before a small desk.

After giving my name, he hands me a temporary ID — a credit-card size piece of paper with my name and prisoner number — and a tiny *Prisoner's Handbook*. I'm now aka 365820, a number which will be mine forever, dead or alive, as far as the penitentiary system is concerned. I'm the 365820th official inmate since Her Majesty's colonial government established the post of Superintendent of Victoria Gaol in 1879. There has been 365819 prisoners before me according to record, not counting miscellaneous low-lifers disposed of without a number or fuss in the good old days. If I were to be jailed a hundred times before I die, I would be referred to by this same number during each internment.

With new ID in hand, I turn and notice John a few bodies behind me, looking distracted, probably shocked by the total lack of organisation.

Nobody is directing or coordinating, yet a latent force moves us on, unfolding the check-in process one step at a time.

Oh no, another strip search?

It turns out to be just as ceremonial as the performance at the courthouse basement, except that this booth is less concealed. People mill around while I push against the wall naked. Nobody looks. A strip search here arouses as much curiosity as pig slaughtering in an abattoir. After the search, I pick up a brown cotton uniform from a random heap, and a pair of colour matching plastic slippers. No fitting allowed. My pants turn out to be far too short. Oh well, who cares.

Hugging my brandname suit and shiny shoes, I continue with the flow.

This morning, I wore my smartest suit, matched by an honest looking tie. Judges tend to favour well-dressed citizens. No? I'd challenge doubters of this practical insight to wear flip-flops, torn jeans and muscle shirts to court if they ever get into trouble with the law. At the next stop, my designer clothes are shoved into a transparent garbage bag, to be jailed separately in a warehouse until 27 May 2014, my expected date of early discharge if I continue to behave exemplarily, as the wise judge noted. In this climate, they'll be full of mushrooms by then.

Hey, was that it? Was that the much feared body search? No big deal if it was!

There are deeply troubling tales about cavity searches in prison, supposedly to look for drugs and weapons. I can imagine smuggling drug through the back door. But what kind of weapon

could one conceal in the rectum? A knife? A stick of fart-proof dynamite? Razor blades? Sounds like a load of crap but...the whole idea of imprisonment is to creep people out so they'd think twice before breaking the law unless they're really hungry, or stupid, or unlucky. Perhaps the awful practice had expired? Perhaps...

The onslaught of wishful perhapses ends abruptly outside a room with a waiting bench. Beyond the half open door are two officers in yellowish lab-coats. An inmate is pulling his pants up as he comes out. He walks past us in unwarranted haste, but doesn't seem to be limping.

One of the officer removes his latex gloves and tosses them into an overflowing bin. Is there blood on it? Can't see from this distance. Damned ageing eyes.

One by one we enter.

Finally...

Me?

The nearer officer looks as if I were a hopeless idiot, wasting his time, staining his performance record. Maybe I am. I'm starting to understand wordless reprimands. I enter, trying to relax, as if entering my dentist's office.

'False teeth?' Oh, is he really a dentist?

'No, Sir.'

'Open.' He looks in, and notes something down. He's in charge of the oral end of things. I watch, and wait.

Should I move on?

CSD officers are taciturn minimalists. When they really must say something, they go straight to the point, encrypted in jail slang. I wish there were orientation courses in *Prisonspeak* for novices so I don't have to respond to half the questions with stupefied wide eyes.

The second officer standing next to a waist-high bin of used surgical gloves is waiting. Is he grinning?

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Oh, me? Really? Right now?
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He pulls on a fresh pair of gloves. Thankfully, the CSD doesn't have an environmentally enlightened reuse scheme in this particular operation.

He goggles in wordless exasperation: What the fuck are you waiting for!

Hope I haven't pissed him off. I walk over, knees trembling imperceptibly. Oh, by the way, I need to pee. What if...

'Pull down. Bend over.'

Whatever you say buddy. I grit my teeth, close my eyes, and bend over. A sudden surge of sadness sweeps over me.

A dragonfly lands tentatively on lotus leaf, a glittering pearl of water twirls at the centre.

Was that just the warmup?

'Okay.'

Is that it?

'Thank you, Ah Sir, thank you,' wholeheartedly.

Yippee-I-O! Trepidation has a wonderful aftertaste when it's finally proven unwarranted.

After a full circle around Hell's reception hall, we're now duly serialised, changed into the colour of manure, and anally inspected. The amorphous flow is back to where it began. Brown zombies settle upon wooden benches. Social sediments, sludge. Fraternising promptly resumes.

I survey the surroundings for the first time since arrival.

Rows of long wooden benches occupy most of the room. Much of the toffee lacquer coating has come off, revealing patches of a darker brown underneath. Brown and grey are evidently CSD theme colours. Many a celebrated criminal must have sat on these benches for long indolent hours before their names are used to frighten misbehaving children.

John emerges from the examination room, looking irritated.

I'm tempted to greet him à la Lai Chi Kok — Hey! Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai! Thought I'd fucking bump into you here! Ha ha!

I smile instead. He wouldn't get or appreciate the joke.

He plunks down next to me.

'How dehumanising!' he huffs through clenched teeth, face ashen.

Did he get it, like, really hard? Or merely roused by injured pride and suppressed irritation? John's known for his impatient but meticulous style at work. I think his apparent irritability is due to an intellectual annoyance at his own compulsive sense of duty over stupefying and pointless corporate tasks. As always, life's a civil war within oneself which only ends with death, or enlightenment. But being an avid reader of the Financial Times, he might have made enlightenment unnecessarily difficult, and possibly acquired a very different interpretation of humanness than mine.

Now that he's mentioned the curious aspect of humanness, I can't help wondering if the lowly anal inspector actually has one of the most dehumanising jobs conceivable. Does he ever talk about work at home? *Honey, you should have seen this giant arsehole I poked at today, hairy too*. Has he ever sniffed his finger absent-mindedly at the dining table? Who, him or John, was more *dehumanised* through their mutually abominated contact just now?

I turn to take a look at John and the happy cons around us, and realise that I must have overanalysed again.

To most people, a job's a job. Mr. Officer has probably never considered the dehumanising side of his job, just like John may not realise that the corporate environment also erodes human qualities relentlessly, albeit more subtly.

'Oh well,' I shrug.

A philosophical deliberation of humanness now would be ludicrous. There are many other pressing priorities.

I usually consider *killing time* ridiculous and contradictory, especially when muttered by people who would do anything to live longer, in order to gain more idle time for recreational killing.

But now that time has turned against me on judicial command, I'd like to have it killed, murdered, disposed of.

It's starting to look dark outside. Must have sat here for half an hour, or much longer. There isn't a clock anywhere. What does it matter though? Time is now a malleable unit of punishment, hidden from those serving it. Watching the heavy hands of a clock slogging through compressible space-time would only heighten frustration. Not needing to decide what and when next is actually quite relaxing, an urban privilege. Unfortunately, positive thinking can't fool the sit bones. The big cushy muscles are succumbing to the hard cold surface of the antique bench.

Oh well, oh well, look around instead. Inmates are still bonding with multi-syllable cursing and laughter. They defeat the system by ignoring time, making it irrelevant. What if...

'...365820...' An officer announces from a list of numbers.

I spring to my feet and raise my hand: 'That's me!'

He rolls his eyes. What have I done wrong now?

'Single file!' he orders.

After sitting idly for so long, lining up to go somewhere seems exciting. Due to a mild cardiac condition, John will go to the hospital ward. I eye him goodbye as twenty or so of us file out like kindergarten children. No need to put hands on the shoulders in front.

Our guide communicates with command centre through a walkie talkie. Gates unlock and relock sequentially, making ugly bang bang noises. They must have been designed to sound threatening. A few minutes later, we arrive at a big dining hall. Haven't eaten or drunk anything for hours, but not hungry or thirsty.

A guard hands each of us a plastic pint mug. Inside is a limp plastic spoon definitely unfit for tunnelling, a small piece of loosely-knit cotton towel, a tiny bar of soap, a green toothbrush (adding colour to the brown and grey world), a tube of toothpaste, and a tiny comb which I have no use for. I have not needed a comb since a miscommunication in Paris a decade ago. In a barber shop, or whatever fancy artistic label barber shops are given these days, I explained in what I thought was French that I wanted a slight trim — *un peu s'il vous plaît*. I then told the coiffeur that he looked like Picasso, and fell fast asleep as was my habit during haircuts. I woke up to see a close crew cut in the mirror. I looked bald, a bit like Picasso. After recovering from the shock days later, I started to appreciate the convenience of my new hairstyle, and how good it looked after a long flight.

It's getting late in the evening. Dinner awaits us in floppy blue plastic plates spread out on long tables. I pick one up, curving it slightly so it wouldn't droop and spill my rice. In my other hand is the mug and stuff.

I file on, apprehensive yet curious, wondering what my bedroom — sorry, cell — in Hong Kong's worst hellhole is going to be like.

* * *

The dormitory building is a basketball court away from the main dining hall. We amble phlegmatically across at flip-flop pace, slippers hissing hypnotically against ground. Nobody lifts his feet. So un-Hongkong to appear not in a hurry. At the staircase, feet are lifted reluctantly, turning the hisses into grudging splat-splats. Two floors up, a duty guard behind a small wooden desk at the landing assigns cells from a roll sheet. Most cells are shared by two, but I don't have a roommate.

After checking in, I turn right onto a long corridor.

On the left are vertical windows about fifteen centimetres wide, spaced no more than a meter apart. Visually, they appear big enough for a convict with a banana head and starvation-child-size body to squeeze through. If such a deformity manages to get through, he'll free-fall onto the guarded playground below with a *splat*, or *thud*.

On the right are grottos partitioned by masonry walls. Metal grilles face the hallway. A zoo. In the centre of each grilled section is a gate, wide open right now. In the middle of high density Lai Chi Kok, no sign of outside life comes through the windows. I feel awfully lonely.

This looks a lot like jail, an old one, a bit stinky, but well-lit and reasonably clean, not the dark leaky dungeon Derek implanted in my imagination. He's by far the most compulsive expectation manager I know. Whatever he looks at, from any angle, he sees disasters on behalf of his clients.

The entrance is just about my height. I stoop unnecessarily to enter, holding the mug and curled up dinner. Neighbouring cells are being filled noisily. A guard walks down the hallway, slamming the gates shut one by one.

Clank!

I'm finally behind bars, many bars, all alone.

An involuntary sigh. Sad, resigned, relieved.

Two grey fibreglass platform beds — four stubby legs and a flat top — flank the entrance. Between them, where I stand, is empty space approximately one bed wide. At the far end of the left bed is a squat toilet raised about a metre above floor level, more elevated than the one at the courtroom basement. A giant intermediate step bridges the elevation difference. A low partition provides nominal visual screening. Privacy no longer exists — that much is clear. Oh well, privacy is just a recent urban fuss anyway.

The giant public WC in the basement of the old Central wet market in my childhood was worse. I had to hold my breath to enter. Along one side of the public convenience, the floor was raised to accommodate an open channel running from one end of the defecation hall to the other. Low partitions even smaller than the one here were fixed perpendicular to the ditch, creating tiny longitudinal compartments, each fitted with a cast-iron door flap, hinges frozen open by rust and grime. The door flaps were covered with discoloured smears of boogers and phlegm and other objectionable whatnots better left unidentified.

Standing up in a stall, looking down the ditch, one could see fellow occupants on their haunches, facing this or that way. Underneath, a flotilla of turds undulated with the gentle

current. To a boy, it was more fascinating than disgusting. Back then, they sailed straight out to beautiful Victoria Harbour, warm and fetid, rich in semi-decomposed organics and nutrients, for 'marine treatment'. This toilet here in LCK, contemptuously designed for a single squat-alone user rather than linearly networked, triggers nostalgia.

Wedged against the other corner, opposite the toilet platform, is a tiny triangular fibreglass stand identical to the one at the courtroom cell. Like the beds, it's also grey and bolted down. Between it and the toilet corner is a miniature sink fitted with a bronze faucet, loosely dangling like a stereotypical prison tap. I put my dinner and mug on the stand, and turn the tap on to test. It actually works, and doesn't drip. Surprise, surprise.

I climb the step to use the toilet, straining lousy knees. Have not been drinking, but urinating more than normal since arrival. Nervous bladder, I guess. Would I dehydrate?

What a thunderous flush!

Installing a violently splashy toilet above the head of a bed confounds common sense, like everything else today. I come down from the slippery mini-stage gingerly, and inspect the dinner plate: A handful of cold peanuts, and a generous pile of cold mung-bean sprouts on cold rice. I sample the peanuts. Not bad. Not even soggy. Another surprise. This prison works better than it looks, indication of substance over style. I haven't eaten since breakfast, but don't feel hungry at all.

An apparition materialises on the other side of the grille. How long has he been watching?

Noticing that he's got my attention, he slips a pile of bedding through the bars. I rush over to take them, then thank him with a big smile. He turns blankly and pushes his cart down the corridor. What's the name of the hunchback of Notre-Dame? *Quasimodo!* Yes, Quasimodo. Picturing him playing an organ at midnight from a watchtower, a full moon in the background, I nearly smile for the first time today. Quasimodo is followed by an inmate pushing a water cart. I stick my mug out eagerly. Not feeling thirsty, but dehydration is a rational concern.

I inspect the pile: Six grey military blankets — coarse, impregnated with dust, heavy with moisture; a thin pillow the size of a large dictionary, about three centimetres thick when not loaded; two baby blue bedsheets and, rolled up inconspicuously between them, a teeny cigar of toilet paper. I carefully unroll it, expecting a nasty surprise, and get one: Eight squares of gossamer tissues, slightly damp from atmospheric moisture. *Shit*. You call this toilet paper? I honestly am not fastidious but — but — but — you call this toilet paper? It definitely won't withstand nominal assertion. I can tell that folding it after the initial wipe would result in the layers slipping and sliding over the content while one or more fingers go through. I have a hyperactive digestive tract with short retention time and high rejection rates. Eight squares of *this* simply won't do.

Eight!

I'm deeply worried. Brown uniform is not an acceptable solution.

A guard strolls past at this distressing juncture.

'Excuse me, Ah Sir,' I stop him spontaneously. In desperation, I've forgotten my tentative jail manners. He looks at me, expressionless.

'Is it possible to get more?' I raise the translucent roll, smiling meekly, imploring.

He pauses. Then pauses. Then enunciates impassively: 'Everyone eight squares. You give that a good thought, huh?' then walks on.

How zen. So I give the matter a good thought. Mind over faecal matter.

I run through contingencies and consequences, and panic. It's going to be a disaster. The only feasible solution — not an easy one — is abstinence. Luckily, I haven't eaten all day. Mass balance is on my side. But for how long?

Loudspeakers in the corridor erupts into the evening radio show at rattling decibel, startling me out of my toilet paper trepidation, nearly scaring the shit out of me. People with only eight squares a day better stay very calm. Cigarette smoke fills the air to a point which chokes. If the building is equipped with smoke detectors, they must have been set to a dangerously tolerant level. What would happen if a fire broke out?

Neighbouring partiers raise their voices to chat above the radio. Such a happy prison. Is this a 'only in Hong Kong' thing? We love noise under all imaginable and unimaginable situations. I doubt that a Finnish slammer would be this boisterous on a New Year's Eve, even upon news of a general pardon.

I stack five blankets, each folded once, for mattress, leaving only one to cover for warmth, then lie down. They feel prickly, stiff, and damp through my cotton uniform. Even with ten layers of blankets, the bed is too hard, and I normally like a firm mattress.

Stop whining...it's only reasonable that prison beds are super hard.

The blistered ceiling looks like the inside lining of a monster stomach, or the mottled surface of a piece of slippery blue cheese; I'm now one of the resident bacteria.

The new reality starts flickering against a numbed awareness — I'm in jail, I really am.

So glad to be alone right now, yet also intensely lonely. The party noise makes loneliness more unbearable, heightening a freezing sense of isolation. I seem to be the only unhappy inmate in Hong Kong's premier hellhole.

Is it me? Or them?

My thoughts drift to Satu and Comrade Xiaoping, our eight-year-old daughter who doesn't yet know what has happened. We had discussed letting her know, in case *this* happened, but decided to postpone it because *nah*, *this won't happen*. Why not wait another year or so, when she would be definitely old enough to understand the full story? We didn't mind letting her know, but couldn't figure out how to convey the truth without making her prematurely cynical. Legal cynicism age in our family is twelve.

Her sister Claire is studying in Canada, undoubtedly mature enough to understand the volatilities in life. We have told her everything from the onset, making her intensely worried, giving her an overnight bald spot. Now that...

Stop! Stop this melodrama and self-pity!

Think positive. Look at the bright side. There has to be one. Find it! Look how happy others are!

I'm normally quite good at rationalising miseries and regrets. This is the time to put my denialist talents to practical use.

Many great guys had done time in jail: Socrates, Jesus, Galileo, Sima Qian, Gandhi, Mandela, and my timelessly favourite poets Li Bai, Su Dong Po...The list goes on. That's how the world is. Human *justice* has always been unfair. Fancy popes go straight to Heaven, led by trumpeting angles, after having barbecued women and scientists and heretics alive. Great men of modern terror — Bush and Cheney and their chums — will never end up behind bars, so, here you go.

Placing myself in the ranks of Galileo and Sima Qian doesn't seem to do the trick though.

Their misfortune doesn't make me feel better. It reinforces a sense of injustice instead, and adds weight to the mood. I need hope, not anger or despair. I'm a realist, am I not? Take the human world as it is, and deal with it.

Let's try again.

Okay, the world's ridiculous, and life's absurd. What else is new? Always has been, always will be. Isn't it more *colourful* that way? I've always known that...

That doesn't work either.

Human absurdity is amusing only when it doesn't affect me. Now that I'm a victim, it's no longer funny. I sigh audibly. No one can hear me anyway, even if I scream. Sighing feels good.

All kinds of *what-ifs* bubble in my head. Don't normally do *what-ifs*. They are counterproductive and pointless. But this ain't normal time.

No. No what-ifs either. Don't have the energy for that.

My eyes are really tired. I take my glasses off and put them under the bed lest I step on them accidentally. Won't hurt to be extra careful. Breaking them will no doubt be a hassle. The engineer in me is still present. Without glasses, the ceiling looks cleaner and smoother. Most of the time, we actually have no need for clear vision.

Wait, the radio's off! When did that happen?

I must have blocked out the racket completely, or dozed off, which I feel sure I hadn't. Dozing off happens unknowingly all the time, but I have never come out of a nap without transition. Weird. Another chunk of time lost. Yet another eternally insignificant puzzle.

I regard myself quite easy going when it comes to time, never blame it for making lousy moments longer than pleasant ones, or moan about having too much or too little of it. I treat time like fish treat water — ignore and let pass as I involuntarily move through. But now that someone is trying to punish me by confiscating my time, it suddenly comes into a different focus. Perhaps I should counter by savouring every moment in the coming years, turning penalty into reward? Yeah, sure, how?

A guard strolls past without looking this way. A fish making clockwise rounds in a clockless aquarium.

I feel like reminding him to turn the light off. Just kidding. It has been dimmed while I blacked out, but still bright enough to read. In order for the government to keep us watched

24/7, we must be sufficiently illuminated at all time. As a result, there's no darkness in jail — just like in Heaven.

Light doesn't bother me when I sleep. I have eyelids. But right now, they won't close.

I internalise my blank stare at the brain. Random thoughts flutter like loose pages from a notebook flying in the wind. Wish I had my own notebook to jot down these snap shots. Maybe I can piece them together one day, to keep the remains of my day pointlessly occupied...

This is so unexpected, so far off the mark, so ridiculous...Admit it, I've been naive, embarrassingly so. How could my expectation be so ridiculously off the mark?

I'm an engineer, a professionally conditioned *realist*, sociologically and philosophically unromantic. I have no problem seeing that the justice industry is run by bored mortals artificially elevated and isolated from the real world, and that they have issues and weaknesses like the rest of us — probably more so — as exclusivity tends to breed delusions. Under their aura and wigs, judges are very ordinary men and women with mood, prejudice, ego, vanity, ego again, boredom, family problems, and alcohol. But they can't complain about their hugely prestigious but tedious job because a judge bitching about how stupid and boring it is to be a judge just isn't right. So some drink. The magistrate who ordered this room for me is infamously injudicious with alcohol, for example.

Neither am I surprised that lofty legal principles such as the benefit of the doubt; proof of motives; actus reus and mens rea and other italicised law words are in reality latinised bullshit, at least partially, and that justice is in essence arbitrary. Yet, though fully vaccinated with pragmatic cynicism, I still believed in a bottomline rationality. Without fundamental consensus, I figured, nothing would work in the human world. No amount of words can fully define an agreement. All social contracts and aspirations — freedom, justice, commerce, civility, dialogues, negotiations...would break down. Civilisation would breakdown. Human society would breakdown. The consequence is too serious to contemplate. Plus I also believed simple logic — basic and instinctual logic — to be universal, at least among well educated people such as magistrates. Simple logic tells me that a confessed liar cannot possibly be credible just because he has freely admitted to having lied repeatedly under oath, until now.

This is where it went wrong.

Simple logic had failed. My simple assumption is faulty, or dated. Evidently, there is no longer a common bottomline on what is clearly reasonable.

Cold floodlight from outside pours in through the windows, casting slender rectangular stripes on the floor, turning the hallway into a giant barcode. A gaoler stomps through it every ten minutes or so. At the end of the corridor, a device registers his dutiful arrival with a piercing beep. I don't mind. I ain't sleeping yet. But what about other slumbering criminals?

So Hong Kong. Most publicly beeping devices are set to maximum volume to advertise their technological and caring presence. Subway turnstiles go berserk to signal admission or rejection. Traffic lights make earsplitting beeps to warn the blind and damage hearing. Escalators broadcast loopily that users must hold the handrail tight — TIGHT! TIGHT! VERY

VERY TIGHT! — giving the impression that escalator rides are a dangerous urban adventure for daredevils only. One tiny slip, and you'll be minced meat. Such a treacherous place. No wonder we're all crazy.

Yawn. Enough rambling. Sleep.

But the eyes won't stay shut. The lids spring open involuntarily. Maybe they've shrunk. Insomnia, an unfamiliar experience, is irritating. The insomniac mind is full of negative thoughts, torturing with a sizzling sense of injustice.

Sweet dreams are a myth. Have never experienced a 'sweet and peaceful dream', and don't believe anyone has. Not asking for a sweet dream right now though, just a dream which takes me to a different world, at least a different situation...

Suddenly, I'm seized by a good idea, warmed by intense hatred. My eyes narrow down to a slit. The tongue tastes bittersweet. Come to think of it, I haven't brushed my teeth yet, have I?

With narrowed eyes and shallow breath, I see them lining up before me, down below, waiting for my verdicts with begging eyes.

First in line are the ICAC agents.

'You twisted evidence and coached the witness to keep your in-trays occupied, employment contracts renewable, and power expanded. With a light and happy heart, I hereby sentence you to a painful death. Next!'

Oh dear, that sleazy goof of a prosecutor, looking like a cheap counterfeit Harry Potter in his robe.

'You don't care a smidgen about justice, and are awkwardly theatrical. Remember that time when you raised your hands sky high to appeal to His Honour not to grant us bail? You compared John and I to Al Pacino in Godfather III. That was so stupid. Nobody, including the judge, I'm sure, including those who had watched the movie multiple times, got your point. What was your point anyway? Never mind. Enough said. Just go die!'

Finally, hey, *Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai* — You! Your Fucking Honour! Kneel!

'Look at me in the eyes, you wigged creep! You called us *exemplary citizens* but sentenced us to jail. What kind of arsehole would send exemplary citizens to jail, huh? You said we had not done anything to benefit ourselves, so where's your proof of motives? What about the benefit of the doubt? Christ, why am I wasting my time. I hereby sentence you to a painful and gruesome execution. Guards, Devils, take him away! May God have mercy upon your soul. Amen.'

No, wait, not death, quite the opposite.

Ha, I have a better idea.

With pitch dark pleasure, I hereby condemn you all to live exceedingly long lives, on and on and on, until your last tooth falls off when chewing water, then live some more. May you spend the last decades in a cheap hospice, stinking from oozy bedsores, mouldering under soaked nappies. Let your children find out how repulsive you truly are. It's Christmas again, hear the recurrent electronic carols in the hallway? The kids are here for their five-minute annual visit,

standing two metres away, holding their breath. Finally, you turn a hundred and ten, staying awake night after night in cold wet beds, skin chafed raw by rough blankets covered with pus stains. Once you doze off, vengeful spectres of innocent victims whom you had framed, entrapped, misguided, and ruined would swarm your nightmares. *Yahoo!* Your disused conscience will be scourged by regrets in terminal delirium, which would feel like eternity. Clingy vindictive ghosts will stop you from escaping into a next life.

Ah! That feels good. Basking in the joy of revenge, I nearly smile.

The last sporadic whispers in neighbouring cells have turned into snores. Heartfelt cursing is indeed therapeutic. But after a moment of calm, a second round of outburst has arrived. I've added fresh charcoals to the fire. Negative energy was temporarily smothered, not extinguished. The firestorm is building up pressure, ready to flare anew. My usual sense of detachment has collapsed, or imploded, smouldering deep down, emitting toxins.

I hate this world.

Darkness has engulfed everything, even with prison lighting. My eyes sting with tiredness, but still won't close. I stare hard at nothing.

Have I always had this boiling venom in me, waiting for a justifiable moment to erupt?

The night guard drags his heavy boots down the corridor. Sounds like he's hauling a chained metal ball.

Beep!

Another fifteen minutes gone. Only a million or so more to go, assuming that I behave, something which cannot be taken for granted. But the young guard will have to count many more minutes before reaching his distant promise of a government pension.

A creepy wail gives me a start.

WTF! A baby? In here? A baby right in this very cell?

Cold sweat is real, not metaphorical. I'm wide awake, saturated with adrenalin, simultaneously hyper alert and giddily confused.

I reflexively reach under the bed for my glasses.

What if a tiny icy hand grips my wrist?

Luckily, my glasses are right there.

Put them on and look around. Nothing strange. That's strange, given that everything here's kind of strange.

Turn over to hang my head over the edge of the bed to peek underneath.

Stale greyness. A faint stink, but no fluorescent green eyes.

Thank all gods and the relevant authority for keeping the light on. Such a great idea.

Here it goes again!

Goddamned cats. Goddamned fucking creepy cats!

Have not heard the painful sound of feline love for decades. It was once common in late spring nights. Don't know what made them disappear. Perhaps like humans, they have given up

on bothersome love life except in this forsaken fringe of our sterile world? Or was that the yowling of wretched spirits trapped in this hellhole?

As I drift into macabre irrelevance, seething rage momentarily forgotten, a loud whisper comes from next door: 'See Hing! Hey, See Hing!' Convicts address each other See Hing, literally senior brother in a trade or kung fu club.

He sounds urgent, but, sorry bro, can't deal with urgency right this moment, not even my own.

Slow the breathing, pretend to be sound asleep. Prison isn't the place to be friendly or curious. That much street sense I do have. In any event, I'm not in a position to do anything for myself, much less a stranger. Thankfully, there's a solid thick wall between us.

The stomach tenses. A burp got stuck behind the sternum.

Snoring and caterwauling continue intermittently in the background, building up disturbing energy, setting the stage for something big and nasty to happen.

'Hey! See Hing!' Now shouting, no longer hissing, voice packed with menace. Don't fuck with me, man. I know the fucking trick.

He bangs the wall between us real hard, probably with both fists, sending a tremor through the grotto, and me. A tidal wave of goosebumps sweeps my back. What a busy day for my biology, one brutal stimulus after another. Have never checked blood pressure. It'd be interesting to take a reading right now.

Calm down. I'm safely behind thick concrete and plenty of steel bars. What can he do?

The snoring in neighbouring cells dies down. Am I pretending to be the only one sound asleep? Am I insulting him by ignoring? What if I bump into him first thing tomorrow, as we leave for breakfast? *Hey, arsehole, you ignored me last night, didn't fucking you?* I'm not here to make enemies, am I? Gangsters hate being snubbed. Who doesn't? Just check out what his urgency is, be very nice and honestly helpless, then sleep.

'Everything okay?' With exaggerated bleariness.

'Got a fag, See Hing? Pass me one.'

We can't see each other, but hands can go through the bars and meet halfway if I had a cigarette to pass him. Can't imagine anyone this addicted to tobacco, though I no longer trust my imagination.

'Sorry, don't smoke.'

'C'mon man...' His tone turns unquestionably vicious. It's an unequivocal *I'll fucking kill* you if you lied.

'Seriously, I don't.' Though I wish I did right now. It'd be a pleasure to give him one, or two, even the whole pack. Damn. Why did I quit? I take a deep breath. The stuck burp is turning acidic. I need a cigarette. An opium pipe would be even better.

He kicks the wall hard, really hard. What if he breaks some toes and imputes the damage to me?

'What's the matter?'

It's the guard! It's the guard! Hallelujah! Blessed is the one who invented jail guards!

He sounds oddly gentle and understanding, cooing rather than commanding, not at all jail-guard like, at least not the kind Stephen King describes.

Something doesn't sound right. What if they actually know each other, and are in this together, trying to use my failure to offer up a cigarette as an excuse to get me into some unthinkably sadistic trouble? My imagination is evidently still alive, weary and peculiar.

The cats reach a crescendo. Why don't they just shut up and do it?

'Gotta fag, Ah Sir?'

'No. Sleep now.' Ah Sir's voice remains nice, but firm.

'Can you ask him?' Sensing his finger pointing my way, I cringe.

'He's clean. No bullshit. Go sleep now.' The guard walks away at his hallmark pace.

See Hing quiets down. Am I clean? I showered this morning. But now that I have had this blanket on my body all night...

He screams again, this time not at me. 'Go get a fucking smoke *Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai*! Do you fucking hear?'

I prick my ears.

'What the fuck man! Where the fuck do you expect me to get a fag now?' His cellmate's feeble reply is patently reasonable. Did they know each other before tonight?

He who needs to smoke right this very instant repeats his unreasonable demand hoarsely.

His cellmate repeats his reasonable protest emphatically: 'Where the fuck do you expect me to get a fag from man!' How could anyone not agree with that plain fact?

Can cigarettes be this addictive? What's his brand, I wonder.

'Go get a fucking cigarette ah! Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai!' A broken gramophone.

Then, a fight, or a beating.

Bang! Phew! Splat! Bang bang!

Life could be worse. I could have been assigned his cellmate.

The guard saunters back, still hauling invisible ball and chain. He has seen this shit before, no doubt.

'Why are you making life hell for yourself and others?' So unperturbed, nearly philosophical, though palpably bored.

No answer. Can't come up with a sensible answer on his behalf either. All this fuss for a cigarette?

Abruptly, to my very huge surprise, banging resumes, right before the jail guard who is presumably watching with folded arms.

I stiff up under the blanket, motionless, eyes squeezed tightly shut, grimacing in disbelief.

What kind of an undisciplined disciplinary institution is this?

Flower Lounge Hellhole

As I worry about security and safety in this institution, more guards show up. Don't know how many. The silence tells me there are more than one. Unlike the duty officer, their steps are light, purposeful, and ominous.

Without a word, the gate is opened.

Without a word, they leave.

Quietness resumes, punctuated by caterwauling, humans snoring, and the roaring of my internal furnace stoked up afresh by volatile adrenalin and dark energy.

* * *

Heart over Mind

The predawn chorus of early birds comes through the dark windows tentatively, sounding incongruously pleasant. If I come back as a worm in the next life, I would stay in bed till nine. Early worms get the birds.

Still gazing with empty wrath. I have many reasons to be angry. But after hours of mental tempest, I no longer know what these reasons are.

So what. I don't need justifications.

But venting my spleen through maledictions is futile, tiring, and irrational...

Wait, irrational? There isn't any rationality here, there, everywhere. Can't believe I'm still worrying about 'rationality'.

No! This can't go on! I'm grilling myself in blind fury. Herbalists say anger hurts the liver. My liver will turn black and brittle if I don't put the fire out.

Breathe slowly, mindfully, deeply, into the abdomen.

Breath in. Hold. Breath out. Fire — like a European dragon.

Sleep, dream, escape to another situation, any situation.

Really? Think again. Imagine. Life could be worse, infinitely worse in another situation...

I could have been born in one of those war torn countries, rich in oil, poor in defence. This afternoon, I watched my wife and kids playing in the field, happy about something urbanites don't care about, such as harvest. A drone appeared out of the bright blue sky, gliding noiselessly, controlled by a bespectacled 'brave young man' thousands of miles away. 'Look, Papa,' the children yelled excitedly: 'Look!'

Boom.

I screamed and threw a rock in the direction of the murderous drone, long gone by then. That was all that I could do in revenge, like a terrorist.

The 'brave young man' watched online.

Oops, wrong target. Nah, no target is wrong. They all grow up to be enemy combatants anyway.

He shrugged, logged off, mission accomplished. He bumped fists with colleagues, then drove home to his son's birthday party. My only wish left in life would be to get a glimpse of his face before I die, so I can take his image with me to Hell. Don't want to go to Heaven. Don't want to

meet God, or Allah, or whatever His real name may be. If I did, I'd be kicked right back to Hell anyway for being extremely disrespectful to the Ultimate One.

See? Helplessness comes in much crueler forms.

This, is Mickey Mouse.

Breath in. Hold. Breath out. Bring it all out. Flare. Dissipate.

Another pathetic scenario comes to mind.

I could be lying in my deathbed prematurely right now. Instead of a wigged judge, I was victimised by one of numerous non-drinking, non-smoking, non-aggressive, clueless drivers plaguing the streets of Hong Kong. He drove his shiny car onto the sidewalk, knocked me down at well below speed limit, then reversed over my legs in innocent panic, screaming *Oh sorry! Oh my God!* sincerely apologetic.

Would that be more fair?

Be real, what's fair? I'm a diehard realist — a cynic, actually — remember? Would it help to strangle the hypothetical idiot? Incompetence and stupidity have become the norm, manufacturing victims everywhere, not only in the justice factory. Shit happens, as always, though never with as much popular justification as now. Reasons are irrelevant when shit happens.

All kinds of terrible misfortunes strike out of the blue all the time. Hypothetical? Of course, but possible, even likely — more likely than *this*. Life's a hazardous journey. *This*, is relatively nothing. At least there's an excellent chance that I'll go home with both legs functional in twenty five months, thirty and a half days — merely a few million blinks of the eyes — unless I internally immolate myself in the meantime...

Breath in. Hold. Breath out, thoroughly, dissipate.

And what about my numerous lucky breaks in life so far? What had I done to deserve them? Were they not equally chancy? Were they not events coalesced out of fortuity, just like this murky fiasco that emerged from profound misfortune? Have I ever complained about being *unfairly* lucky?

What shameful double-standards.

Imagine again: I could have been born stupider and lazier, into a different family, a different world, a different reality, always meeting the wrong people, having only bad decisions made on my behalf since nursery. I could have been living in and out of juvenile jails since thirteen. I would be so conditioned to *injustice* by now I won't feel it any more than fish feel water.

Breath in. Hold. Breath out.

Also, at fifty-seven, my natural deathbed isn't that far away, a few decades at most, much less than a mere blink of the cosmic eye. Soon, I'll have to let go of everything. Rights and wrongs, debts and favours, love and hatred, will all fade into irrelevance, insignificance, nothing. Why not use this opportunity to rehearse *letting go*? This is a good place to practise. No?

Let go...

But those people, evil hypocrites, heartless bureaucratic zombies, arseholes...

They don't know what they're doing.

Tell me about it.

Forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. Many a great prisoner has said that in a spirit of forgiveness, or despair.

So what? Ignorance is no excuse, at least not in their court of law.

Ah, but I don't believe in the judgement of courts anymore, do I? Forgiveness is self-preservation, not unconditional magnanimity. Forgiving saves myself, not them. Forgive to avoid spontaneous combustion. Forgive them. They don't deserve my anger. They don't know what they're doing. People seldom do. They're only being average, and the average rules.

Do they mean to frame and jail innocent people? Don't think so. They probably think they're doing the right thing, if they bother to think at all. It's only a job, a game with simple rules for simple people to play out their assigned roles in a world they don't understand, but too lazy or afraid to ponder.

Forgive them, or turn into ashes before 27 May 2014 — a simple choice.

Breath in Hold. Breath out. Fire. Ashes.

When desperate, I can be rather convincing to myself.

I squeeze my eyes shut to take a break from the schizophrenic monologue. They feel puffy.

The Heart Sutra comes to mind.

During the long trial, a friend gave me a little booklet on the Heart Sutra. 'You might find it inspiring,' she said. 'By the way, Buddhism is not a religion *per se*,' she added quickly, knowing that I'm a fundamentalist atheist. 'Not one with a flying dictator and angelic bodyguards anyway.'

She didn't know I have become quite curious about Daoism and Buddhism in recent years, mainly looking for easy do-it-yourself enlightenment tips to smooth out the remains of my day. An age thing, I suppose.

She also didn't know that I was truly religious once.

Most Hong Kong schools were run by the church, and one Bible teacher after another scared me into submission long before I hit puberty. My first career ambition — one which I never revealed to my parents — was to become a priest when I'm tall enough to look ridiculous in a cassock. Eventually, with the onslaught of puberty, I realised that celibacy was a disturbing

promise. That realisation sobered me up to all kinds of spooky themes in the Bible, and that God wasn't nice and loving no matter how I psychoanalysed him. I willingly and knowingly betrayed God and became a normal, obnoxious teenager. Shouldn't have been a surprise to He who knows absolutely everything in the past, present, and future (except that humans can always be tempted to eat an apple) anyway.

But the Buddha was a fellow atheist, so was Lao Zi, so was Confucius. China has no God, that much I already knew.

'I know, I know,' I assured my friend. 'Not the kind of religion with a God, right?'

I enjoyed the literary style of the mesmerising sutra on first read, and committed it to memory easily, surprising myself. Out of all two hundred and sixty words in the laconic sutra, wu — nothingness, without, emptiness — helpfully repeats twenty-one times.

I recite it in my heart, hoping it will put me to sleep.

Bodhisattva Guanyin in deep Prajnaparamita meditation reflects upon the emptiness of the five aggregates, transcending all tribulations and sufferings...

Nothing. There's nothing. Nothing, really...

Of course! Quantum physics has practically confirmed the emptiness of so-called reality. Realising the ultimate emptiness of existence puts human tribulations to scale, rendering it veritably insignificant. Recognising the empty nature of life isn't pessimistic. Quite the opposite, refusing to see such a plain fact of existence is illusory, unscientific, and pathetic.

I get it!

The Heart Sutra isn't about a nosy deity perverting the course of injustice by giving bad judges giant bloody tumours, or masterminding supernatural jailbreaks in response to diligent incantations. It's philosophical realism which puts things into perspective. It helps us open our eyes while skindiving in shit creek without a mask.

Feeling kind of enlightened.

Beyond bars, faint morning light slips through the windows, erasing the shadowy barcode. It's gentle and warm, not intrusive like the nighttime floodlight. The prisoners sleep on. Let them sleep. Every minute counts. When they sleep, time is an ally.

Birds are twittering louder. They must have had stuffed their gizzards with worms. If one is destined to eat worms, then eating live worms for breakfast would be a happy event worthy of a song.

Abruptly, the loudspeakers come to life, startling me out of my sleepless reverie. No wonder inmates with a heart condition can't stay here. The DJ is hysterical: 'Good Morning Hong Kong!' I can picture him spraying pressurised saliva at the mic. Can't they come up with something a tad more original? *Good Morning America! Good Morning Vietnam! Good*

Morning Saigon! Good morning Hong Kong! When they wish you good morning with over-the-top exuberance, you know they're trying to hide something sinister. What's so damned good about this morning anyway? So empty. The Heart Sutra is right.

I get off bed, feeling surprisingly light. I climb the big step to pee, aiming carefully. The floor can't take any more ammonia.

'365820, you're nothing,' I mumbled. A bit comical, but not funny enough to make me smile. 'Day One survived, *served*. About a thousand more to go. Better get used to it. It's really *nothing* anyway.'

In a moment, I'll find out that understanding is truly nothing, but practising is really something. Maybe heart can overcome the mind, but mind can't overcome matter. Jail is jail, harsh reality. Contingent enlightenment can't make it soft and holographic.

* * *

Into the Cuckoo's Nest

As I descend creakily from the toilet altar, head, soul, and bladder feeling light and empty, I spot the only creature which I'd refuse to deliver from existential suffering even if I somehow became a saint or attained Buddhahood.

A few roaches are roaming the sink, audaciously ignoring my looming presence. Perhaps they're undernourished and blind, or giddy from my high sodium dinner, desperately needing a drink to dilute their creamy bloodstream before returning to the sewer for a diurnal nap. Good thing I didn't sleep last night. They might have nibbled my fingers instead of salty peanuts otherwise. They're lucky that I'm in a spiritual don't-give-a-shit mood, or I would have flattened them all on the spot. Splat splat splat. Despicable. All baby animals are adorable, except this bunch.

Eons ago, big fat *cucarachas* were rampant in this part of the planet. They once ate the tip of my index finger while I slept. It wasn't a big bite, and the wound mild, but bloody enough to leave an indelible smudge in my childhood psyche. Having been feasted on by roaches was humiliating and disgusting, though not as worrying as the prospect of having one in the ear. To add psychological burden to my wounded finger, my father told me cockroaches are indestructible, destined to rule the planet after our self-extinction. 'And they don't have *reverse* in their gearbox. Once inside a narrow canal such as our ears, they would crawl forward into deeper and deeper trouble, until they hit the brain. You have big ears. Be extra careful.' He, my own father, was actually grinning. It was then that I realised grownups are inevitably sick.

Being eaten by roaches is not as creepy as having one die on the chest though. I was still a kid — it was a long childhood — barely recovered from the psychological damage inflicted by children-eating roaches, when a flapping giant flew right through the window on a stormy night, and headed straight inside my pyjama. Reflexively, I squished it against my chest and screamed, as one is expected to under the circumstance: 'Mum! Mum! Mum!' I didn't want help from my father when it comes to cockroaches. While in a frenzy, I could feel hairy scratchy legs struggling against bare skin, leaving a slimy mess of crushed cuticles. I found out much later that cockroaches can live and function without their heads for days. Creepy. Though some government humans can survive without their heads for years, metaphorically speaking, haha.

Clank! The sound of gates opening fills the air.

A screw appears outside mine and unlocks it without haste or caution. He saunters on, doesn't bother to look my way to see if I've escaped downstairs through a spoon dug tunnel in the night. Is he the same imperturbable guard who counselled the *See Hing* next cell last night?

Was last night real? Or just a dream? Did all that really happen?

I look back at the sink. The creeps are gone. Were there any a moment ago?

Asking oneself questions like these is the first step towards insanity.

I stop asking, therefore, and proceed to arrange my toothbrush, toothpaste and towel on the little grey stand to make access difficult if and when they return. If they want to taste the residual toothpaste on my green brush, they'll need a little acrobatics. Nothing can stop them, I know, not even a nuclear holocaust. By making it more challenging, I hope they'll follow the path of least resistance to the next cell. That's nasty and selfish, but I don't feel any guilt.

Drowsy inmates straggle past, mugs dangling from fingers, slippers hissing against bare concrete, staring at the floor a metre ahead. None of them turns to look my way. They've all had a rough party last night, I suppose, with a face to show. I put the spoon inside my mug, hook my finger through its ear and slip outside, trawling slippers. When in prison, do what prisoners do.

Next door's vacant. The gate's wide open.

Involuntarily, I check the toilet paper in my pocket. It feels even smaller than I remember. Has it shrunk from humidity? Or biodegraded overnight?

Following the flow of unguarded cons, I arrive at Fan Tong — dining or Common Room — on fourth floor. Its double-gated entrance is wide open at the moment.

Along both sides of the long rectangular hall are narrow vertical windows similar to the ones downstairs. In front of the windows are bolted-down fibreglass picnic tables with side benches. Near the entrance is the guard's duty desk and, that's right, a widely open washroom. At this morning hour, it's full of squatting *See Hings* chatting, grunting, pushing, and reading newspaper within sniffable distance from the nearest table. Hanging from the ceiling are two television sets tuned to competing channels — one near the entrance, one at the far end, both very loud.

Morning has broken, rather badly.

I walk to one of the emptier tables on the right side, near the middle of the room, a respectable distance from the toilet.

'May I sit here?' I direct my request to both occupants, overly polite.

'Taken,' one of them answers without looking up from the entertainment pages of Apple Daily.

I thank him, then look around feebly. Every table has at least a couple of occupants.

Something — perhaps everything — has abruptly collapsed.

Don't think I have ever been this hyper-sensitive to an impassive rejection. It may not even have been a rejection. This could indeed be a popular table, fully booked in advance. But whatever it was, it has shattered my confidence, self esteem, judgement, orientation...I have no friendly courage left for another enquiry.

The mental clarity attained an hour ago has vanished. Merely an ephemeral illusion.

Inmates are pouring in. They all seem to know where to go. They head straight to a table and plonk right down. The officers obviously don't care who sits where. I wish one of them would usher me to my designated seat right now, handcuffed if necessary, see if I care. Just get me out of this tight spot under my feet. Don't they know gaolers exist because of convicts? I *am* the reason why they have a job to pay mortgage. They should at least make sure that I am duly seated. The relevant authority can't let me stand here till the sun goes down, can it?

Must have stood frozen for a minute or more before noticing the friendly eyes of a boyish-looking fellow across the aisle. He's looking at me with pity, or curiosity, or condescendence. I summon all my residual courage to smile back. He gestures me to join.

I walk over and sit down at the side-bench he's on. He gives a friendly smile. I meekly return one. The tag on the table says 33.

Another *See Hing* sits opposite from us has fixed his stare on me. Empty and intense. Weird. I smile and nod. No response.

The three of us sit in awkward silence. I feel guilty for having brought my saviour this moment of unease, assuming he feels unease like I do.

Now, how to break ice in jail...

Last night, while checking in, I promptly lost the ultra tiny *Prisoner's Handbook* amidst the chaos. Might have left it in my dress pants pocket. There might be a paragraph or two on prison etiquettes. Now I'll have to make them up as I go.

After a few more minutes of silence, I feel obliged to say something to my rescuer: 'So, what're you in for?' After all, there's one thing we all have in common: We're in here for something, no? Seeking commonality is a good way to start pointless small talks in social situations.

But this is not a company cocktail, idiot. The question could be taken wrongly. Wake up.

Too damned late! My brain isn't functioning smoothly, not at all.

Luckily, he doesn't appear to mind.

'Sham marriages.' The reply is nearly eager.

The guy across the table is still goggling at me. I make another smiley attempt to connect, more relaxed this time.

Nope.

Oh well, glad to know that I'm not the only confused person in here.

'Mainlander?' I return to the normal fellow, and take a statistical guess.

'Four,' he volunteers with a self-mocking grin: 'In the same year.' He proudly emphasises the absurdity.

Is he stupid or something? Does he know there's a thing called computer?

I'll call him the *Polygamist* in my future diary, when I have pen and paper.

'Wow!' I exclaim, trying to look impressed and stupefied at the same time. The brain is slowly defrosting.

'Needed the money badly. Consequence didn't matter.' He must have read my mind.

'Yeah, I know,' I lie reflexively.

No, I don't know.

In my social cul-de-sac, consequence matters a hell of a lot, at least in theory. So is risk, as well as return on investment, also in theory. Before retirement, a major pastime at work was to hold endless meetings to discuss and devise ways — we called them *strategies* — to maximise shareholders' return at minimum risks and responsibilities. The keyword is *maximisation*, which means as much return on the buck as possible regardless of need or reasonableness. My new friend has a valid point though. Even for us, consequence was often rationalised away or deliberately overlooked when the money was irresistibly good.

But unlike my polygamous friend, corporate consequences could be mitigated on paper, justified by *unforeseen* circumstances such as economic downturn, new policies after an election, stupid government decisions (a panacea), competitors gone irrational because we had been far too good for far too long, driving them to suicidal pricing, and so on. All rather standard, nearly formulaic. Having duly explained that consequences were in fact an act of God well beyond our control, we then went on to happy hours instead of prison.

Polygamist puts one foot on the bench. I do likewise.

When exchanging personal anecdotes on the crimes which have brought us together, I speak tentatively to match his halting speech — imitating due to an eagerness to blend, not to mock.

He married four mainland women nearly concurrently for ten grand each. The reward was quick cash, the consequence imprisonment. The time in between was bonus.

As he tells his story, I give it a mercantile cost-benefit analysis. Marrying as many as possible in his case isn't as stupid as it first sounded. The chance of surviving a sham marriage these days isn't much better than surviving a real one. Knowing that he would eventually go to jail for it anyway, he might as well do it in quantity, as fast as possible. He's been sentenced to fifteen months. Had he married only one, he would have received only a quarter of the money, and most likely the same nominal sentence. Being monogamous in sham marriage isn't optimal, though the chance of getting caught would have been somewhat smaller, in theory. He must have worked that out in his guts before deciding to enter into multiple contracts.

My turn to sum up 'my reason for being in here'.

Helped by the celebrity of Macao's ludicrously corrupt minister, elaborate background intro is unnecessary. Everyone knows his name, and the many incredible stories — some real, many fabricated — which go with it. Just make sure I don't sound innocent or bitter. Innocence somehow seems pretentious in this room, a negative reflection of one's personality.

Soon after breakfast, new arrivals are sent to the Admin Office to give urine samples. My urine has never been so popular. Peeing on command feels ridiculous, but surprisingly easy. There's always a small amount of reserve in the bladder. After submitting my urinary dues, they take electronic smudge-free prints of all my fingers, then give me a laminated ID featuring name, number, crime, and a mugshot against a height scale. The ID is to be kept on my person at all times. The photo must have been rendered with a specialised filter. I look scary, hopelessly

criminal in high contrast black and white, palpably incorrigible. *Crookface* would be a good product name for it, my marketing side says.

Most inmates carry a transparent portfolio or plastic bag containing all their belongings. Polygamist also has his toiletry items with. Something doesn't seem right. What normal person would carry his toothbrush around all day?

'I left my toothbrush and toothpaste in my cell. Is that okay?' An innocent grin.

'Your cell? The one you stayed last night?'

'Yeah.' Anxiety swells in my voice.

'We sleep in a different cell every night.'

'Oh.' Ha ha. Shit. 'What should I do, then?'

'They issue new ones every two weeks. You probably won't stay here that long though. We normally *Guo Gai* within a week or so. They'll give you a new set there.'

'I see.' *Guo Gai* means crossing a boundary. I guess correctly that he's referring to the transfer to my destination prison. Living without soap and toothbrushing for the next week or two is a depressing prospect, but I'll survive. Super bad breath is probably not regarded antisocial in here. After the tissue enquiry last night, I know better than requesting replacement, for I now know the answer would be something like: *Does this look like a fucking hotel to you?* Oh well, this isn't a hotel, for sure. I'll just pretend to be a king living a few thousand years ago. They didn't have soap and toothpaste, yet they lived like kings, surrounded by guards, like I am right now.

I internalise a sigh. My tongue performs an involuntary glissando over gritty teeth.

A few minutes later, Polygamist retrieves a tooth brush, a tube of toothpaste, and a bar of soap from his bag. 'Take this.' He must have considered my situation carefully, and decided that I deserve charity.

'Keep everything with you all the time. This is not a hotel.'

Ha, everyone knows this isn't a hotel.

'Thank you, thank you. Thank you very very much.' Can't stutter enough to exaggerate my heartfelt gratitude. 'What about you?'

'It's a spare set from a guy who Guo Gai yesterday.'

I thank him again, and put everything into my mug.

I'm deeply touched by his generosity. It doesn't take a genius to notice that every inconsequential article with no recycling value is a big deal in this place. I then ask myself an annoying question: 'Would I be equally generous if we swapped places?' Uh, don't know. This isn't the time for self-examination, so, drop it. However, I know with no uncertainty that I will *not* share my toilet paper with *anyone*, even if he loses control of his bowels right before me.

An internal alarm interrupts my guilt-ridden reflections: 'Wake up! You're in jail. This place is full of criminals and tricksters.'

It's my dutifully distrustful Guardian Angel speaking.

'Maybe he wants something from you? Better err on the side of caution and suspicion, huh?'

It, that angel, has a point. Last night, while staring at the ceiling, I admitted to myself that I've been embarrassingly naive. Prison is no place to be naive.

I sit up slightly, adjust my mentality, raise my guards, continue to look grateful.

As Polygamist and I chat, our table-mate tries to burn a hole in my head with his stare. He hasn't said a word yet, not even a *humph*. That crept me out at first, but I have quickly gotten used to it. I now find his obsessive stare melancholy, even a little saddening. The diffused shimmers in his eyes are clearly harmless, though why he stares this way, and why at me, is likely to remain a mystery. Most probably, he doesn't know either. He may not even be aware that he's staring.

He looks like a petty thief — and not a very successful one at that. But it's far too easy to be rashly judgemental in this situation.

What about Polygamist? He's unremarkably handsome — good looking yet paradoxically indistinguishable from the legendary *average guy*. He can blend into any crowd and disappear instantly — a natural headache for anyone trying to create a composite picture for the cops. Average in height, his nose, eyes, brows, mouth, ears are all similarly average, yet in the right places, properly proportioned and pleasing to look at as a whole. With a resigned smile and forbearing countenance, he looks more like an account clerk who accepts boredom or salary freeze without an audible grumble. No movie casting director would pick him for a criminal role. Though in the real world, criminality depends on the law, and the law can change and flip to make anything a crime, and anyone a criminal.

Anyway, it's not nice to judge by appearance, I remind myself, then continue to do so.

There seems to be a vague correlation between look and character, enough to keep prejudice alive and popular. Perhaps popular prejudice creates its own validity. Confident looking people are confident because everyone thinks they look confident. A mousey-eyed fellow with a hairy hawkish nose, pointy teeth, and lopsided mouth, no matter how talented in deceit, will never become a bank president. Career-wise, he'll find the Triads more openminded.

The Common Room is a dreamland for people watching.

Sitting all day doing nothing is hard on the body and mind. The glutes would hurt and the mind develops static. Except during mealtimes, there's a steady stream of inmates shuffling back and forth the centre aisle, stretching, yawning loudly, chatting quietly, charging it with captive energy. This pageant of faces defies generalisation. There's a wild range of physiognomy and mannerism in this convicted lot. Anyway, I manage to come up with a few nicknames: Hyena Face, Tongue Flicker, Jigsaw Mouth...

Most prisoners don't resemble movie crooks. Among a dozen or so heavy duty aisle-walkers who don't ever sit down, two of them actually look distinctly accomplished. Both seem well-known in this circle. In their perpetual circulations up and down the middle, they hold mobile discussions with one inmate after another, speaking through the corners of their mouths,

nodding periodically as eyes scan the room. They aren't ugly or scary at all, but palpably intimidating. Such an uncanny aura must surely be a natural asset in their careers, like high IQ in rocket science research. Surprisingly, perhaps not surprisingly, they don't appear to know each other. The underground is either very big, and they have never met, or too small to accommodate both.

Quite a few *See Hings* look pleasant and gracious, like helpful neighbours. Perhaps they are. Another few give the impression that life is fantastic and completely under control, as always, while they retreat in *flower lounge*.

Most youngsters look blithely unconcerned that they're in jail. Some even look excited, like college freshmen at orientation. Compared with the seniors, they tend to talk more and walk less. Young bodies don't need exercise to stay fit.

The perpetual circulation reminds me of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a Jack Nicholson classic. In the movie, a bunch of heavy duty mental cases stroll round and round *ad infinitum* in an asylum run by psychotics, driving each other nuts. Nicholson finally scales the high-walled madhouse. The movie doesn't say where he goes from there. To find a clerical job without proper identifications, and be in the company of *normal* people from nine to five until the end of time? In my present state of mind, his escape seems pretty crazy. Things are no more sensible on the other side of the walls. In fact, it's likely to be *less* reasonable and predictable — fundamental conditions of 'sanity'. Is it what one calls jumping out of the frying pan into the fire? Supposedly a happy ending anyway.

Actually, depending on how one perceives sanity, jail can be a relatively *sane* place. Professional criminals are purportedly tricky, violent, greedy, scary, all that. But they know the ruthless facts of life, and are therefore more alert and rational. Most crooks break the law for a reason, rightly or wrongly, smartly or stupidly. Some deserve sympathy. Others don't. But unlike some people I know, they can't afford to discard *reason* petulantly because reality isn't to their taste, or politically correct...

Better not think down this track, lest the ghosts I expelled with the Heart Sutra return to haunt.

Polygamist is a patient teacher, a true *See Hing*. He also seems to enjoy explaining things to me, indirectly encouraging more stupid questions.

We are temporary guests at LCK, he explains, therefore no need to work, not even doing the dishes. Minor offenders with very short sentences may serve them out here, and be assigned chores. I wonder what Quasimodo's minor offence was. Can't recall what he looks like. I was in no condition to take note. Anyway, for now, we just eat, sit, smoke, bullshit, watch TV, watch each other, and party in captivity. And, of course, to supply the authority with urine. Life isn't bad.

'Why do they want our pee so often?'

'Drugs.'

'Ah, yes!' Obviously. What a dumb question. When I get my notebook, I must jot them all down to remind myself how stupid I am when taken out of my comfort zone.

I tell Polygamist about next door last night. 'Can't imagine anyone needing to smoke that badly.' Proud to have shared a jail story with someone more experienced.

'Junkies. When the craving hits, a cigarette is better than smoking the slipper or licking the ashtray.'

'Oh, I see,' for the hundredth time this morning. Learning many new things.

Licking the ashtray is a figure of speech, of course. The piece of concrete slab under our feet, covering Mother Earth, is the ashtray, bone dish, and spittoon, among other things, in this esteemed institution.

'Anything to keep up the suicide, I suppose,' I mumble reflexively.

As soon as the self-righteous words are out, I regret. I hardly know Polygamist's history and business interests besides freelance matrimony. What if his main career is drug marketing, and he believes in what he sells like good salespersons do?

Luckily, he agrees promptly: 'Yup.'

Once again: Suspend all self-righteous or sarcastic remarks until discharge. Absolutely no sarcasm, something I overuse to no effect in Hong Kong. In prison, mistaken sarcasm may spell disaster. Remember!

Okay, one more question: 'When I arrived, they asked me where I slept last night. I didn't know what to say.'

Polygamist laughs. He has a nice laugh. Have I just told a prison joke unwittingly?

'People come and go in Lai Chi Kok. All prisoners transferring between jails, hospitals, and courthouses come here first. That question was to confirm where you'd come from. They knew anyway. Just asking.'

'Oh, I see.'

Twice a day, news from the admin office arrives like wartime dispatches from the front, each summoning a fresh batch of inmates to the office for *Guo Gai* instructions, creating a spike of excitement. Polygamist has been waiting much longer than average for his transfer. His number fails to show up again.

'Have they forgotten me?' he mumbles, looking disappointed.

Nobody likes to be left out, not even when queuing to be locked away somewhere else. I give an innocent shrug. He isn't expecting an answer from me anyway. I turn to the Staring Man for inspiration, assuming that he's more experienced in these things.

Nope, not shifting at all.

Hey, man, it's been hours, take a break!

While Polygamist leaves the table to query the duty officer about his vanishing status, shower order comes. He joins the line directly from the jail guard's desk. It would be awkward

for me to go join him, plus I'm getting tired of bugging someone who knows everything much better than I do. I wish to explore a little on my own, so I join the line at the tail end.

The shower hall is in a different building. As we file out, I notice many shimmering heads under the sun. Instead of bringing the bottle, they squirt shampoo onto their heads. How pragmatic. Suddenly, an old crack about picking up soap in prison pops up to spoil the relaxing moment. What if it's true? True or not, better not drop it.

The shower hall is chaotic like the rest of LCK, and severely flooded.

After stripping at the door like everyone else, I stuff my uniform into one of many damp pigeon holes, then venture inside the big splashy room, treading in ankle-deep sudsy water, surrounded by tattoos and decapitated showers. I don't have a strong aversion to tattoos, merely regard them a pointless embellishment which will almost certainly be regretted one day. Why mark the body with anything that can't be updated or replaced? If your nose is gigantic and crooked, you can at least blame your parents for genetic negligence. When your tattoo expires, you have only yourself to blame. With age, roses wilt, supermen droop, butterflies shrivel, and wheels of life collapse. The same old pattern from younger days, out of fashion long ago, turning weary, wrinkly, broken, odd, faded, folded over, will hang on until reincarnation, or cremation.

But right now, being naked without a tattoo feels really naked. Wish I had a rub-on. Entwined dragons would fit in nicely. What about a poster from the Water Supplies Department at the back? A stainless-steel tap yielding a giant drop of crystalline H₂O emphatically captioned in font size fifty Times Roman: *Conserve Water!*

Water water everywhere, free-flowing, dripping, gurgling.

A vital natural resource is being wasted with criminal disregard. A sick expression of freedom, a nobody-gives-a-damn kind of freedom, a freedom pushed to the limit just because not much else is allowed. Having worked with water and sewage most of my professional life, I have developed a reflexive guilt about wasting water.

I pick a weak stream trickling from one of the headless 'showers' to minimise direct personal responsibility for this wastage. Obviously, the shower heads have been removed so tough guys can't smash each other's head with them. My common sense is returning slowly, adjusting to the new environment.

Now, where should I put my soap. There isn't a holder anywhere, not even a chink in the wall. The floor is three inches under water. In the mouth? What if I swallow by accident? The thought makes me want to smile, but I suppress it. Don't wish to be seen smiling to myself. Not here, not now.

After soaping thoroughly, I clamp the bar gently between my teeth when rinsing off. I then rewrap it with the soaked wrapper, and gargle the taste off. Most inmates have a soapbox held between knees or under their armpits. How I want one of those. Have never desired so many basic implements so badly: A soap box, notebooks, pen, *tissues!* and a plastic bag to carry them in.

After shower, I pick a 'fresh' pair of damp underwear from a huge pile on a long table at the front door. Drying with the low density towelette is comically futile. I put my uniform — third degree wet — back on, then wait outside for someone to herd us, Party 4B, back to *Fan Tong*.

He still hasn't said a word!

All morning, Staring Man listens to Polygamist and I talk. Every now and then, I flash him a friendly grin out of stubborn curiosity, no longer expecting any response. His rugged features is tightly wrapped with barely enough skin; his rolling cheekbones shine with tension. At the far end of deep sockets, trapped eyes stare out absentmindedly, unblinking, watching me, watching the world stage dramas in which he can't participate. His right fore and middle fingers are starkly absent. Might have been ground up by some nasty machine at work. If they were, I wonder how much was he compensated. Were they more, or less, than prime beef on a per unit weight basis? They might have been chopped off by some nasty humans too, then got eaten by a dog nearby, or flushed down a public toilet by the person who removed them, now buried in the landfill, going through anaerobic decomposition. Too many possibilities. Whatever happened, two fingers are presently at large somewhere, not in jail with him as sentenced.

Really really want to interview him. Hey, buddy, you're missing a few fingers, you know. Tell me what happened?

Just a thought, of course. Him and I don't do communication. I give him another smile instead. Blank. *Boo*.

By late morning. A fourth *See Hing* joins our table. He looks sad as hell, and is very quiet, though not waxy quiet like the eight-fingered-man. Everyone except you-know-who greets with eyes. When he seems settled enough, I venture the same ice-breaker: 'So, uh, what you in for?'

Once upon a time, he explains with surprising readiness, he smuggled a few cartons of cigarettes from the mainland.

To balance conflicting concerns over revenue and citizenry health, the Government imposes substantially higher duties on tobacco than the mainland. Invariably, an unreasonable gap in cross-border tariffs creates smuggling opportunities, and this guy grabbed it. I'll call him Marlboro in my diary.

Appearing to be in his late thirties, taciturn Marlboro has a big lump of sadness stuck in his throat. Though friendly, it takes skill and patience to extract words from him. Fortunately, I sense that *See Hings* don't mind talking about their crime if approached sensitively. Perhaps talking about it offloads something from the chest. I might be an exception. Not because I'm ashamed of my criminal record. I simply find it bland and dumb, boring. No sex or violence; no clever planning; no creative execution; no social statements. To adequately reciprocate, I repackage it slightly to make it more lively, and avoid sounding like a guilty child — *it wasn't me!* Insistence on innocence seems dubious in here. Instead, I try to sound, like, you know, *yeah*, *of course*, *no big deal*, *man*.

After a brief exchange of background stories, silence resumed. Silence doesn't normally bother me, but I'm feeling high from sleeplessness, and curious about my new acquaintances. I

need to talk, to stay engaged and awake. In passing, I mention my toilet paper concerns tongue-in-cheek to Marlboro.

He retrieves half a pack of Tempo from his Santa bag: 'Here.'

'Wow. Uh. Wow. Okay. Thanks. I'll pay you back.'

'No need.'

Once again, I'm touched by generosity.

Be careful!

This is a jail for Chrissakes! You don't know who they are, and what they want from you.

It's that small-minded creep, the Guardian Angel, whispering toxins again. It may be right, but is becoming irritating.

Big deal, I snap mentally. I've got nothing now, not even a respectable piece of butt wipe. I have nothing to lose, except the last vestige of trust in people, something which you, Winged One, have absolutely no idea. So, fluff off!

Oh dear, that was profane. I wonder what the consequence might be.

Lunch is light, a modest raisin bun and medium undercooked soya bean slop. That's two days in a row. Evidently, they do feed gruel to prisoners. Everyone lines up, mug in hand, to receive gruel ladled from a red plastic bucket, just like in the movies.

After lunch, as I sit in forced indolence, grudgingly digesting loblolly, an officer hollers: '365820, *Bai Shan!*'

Bai Shan? Grave sweeping? WTF!

'You've got visitor,' Marlboro translates.

My stomach instantly stops squishing. A wave of goosebumps propagates down my back.

Satu and Fai, my best friend and business partner, sit on the other side of thick glass. I have some interests in a couple of small businesses with good friends, ventures which I had to declare in every board meeting when working for big corporations. I've always felt lucky and proud that we have together proven the maxim 'the best way to ruin a friendship is by going into business together' utter nonsense.

They seem more weary than curious in their first visit to a jailing institution. We talk through black plastic phones which look blind and sterile without a rotary dial. Fai keeps up an encouraging smile while Satu and I talk. During the long trial, I had mused to him that a couple of months in prison would actually be an interesting experience. He's an expert in my hallmark facetiousness, and rolled his eyes in response, as usual. Fine, I've jinxed it big time, but I said a couple of months max, nowhere near thirty-nine months. There must have been a huge mistake in hoodoo conversion.

'How're you?'

'Fine. You?'

That isn't how we normally talk.

'How's Comrade Xiaoping?'

'She's fine. I told her you left for a work camp for your old company. I hid your briefcase. She was upset that you didn't say goodbye. I explained it was an emergency.'

'Can't keep it from her forever.'

'I know. Let's see how the appeal goes first.'

Ah, yes, the appeal. I've forgotten that completely. Didn't I analyse the follies of false hope last night? Keep the head down to focus on the situation minute by minute. No expectations. Forget the appeal. To maintain hope right now, I must first purge all hope.

'Sure.' Unenthusiastic, but not pessimistic.

I show off my uniform, and raise my feet to show her the colour matching slippers. 'How about that?'

Okay, not funny. She cries instead. So I cry too.

They have brought a bunch of permissible supplies, all according to specs, and conveniently available in nearby stores. Like the legal and penal bureaus, and the convicts, these stores depend on the crime rate for prosperity.

'Will take a day or two before you get them,' Fai adds. 'They have to be inspected and marked first.'

'Thanks. Did you get tissues?'

'Ten packs.'

'Ten? Great! Thanks!' Soon, there'll be no need to give the matter a good thought as suggested.

'Time's up,' an officer taps me on the shoulder.

'Okay, Ah Sir.'

She's crying again.

'Bye. See you next time,' I wave.

Outside the visiting centre, while waiting to be escorted back to *Fan Tong*, I bump into John. He's been crying too. His wife also just visited.

'How was last night?' I enquire. Given his temperament and language barrier, I suspect that he'll do his damnedest to make life tougher than necessary for himself.

'I thought the hospital ward would be luxury, but it's full of coughing and spitting addicts, screaming and crying all night. I didn't sleep at all.'

'Neither did I.'

I had one neighbouring addict. He had a roomful. Poor guy.

Dinner is sumptuous compared to lunch: rice, slushy veggies, a stringently lemony citrus which resembles an orange, undoubtedly rich in Vitamin C.

Prison routine is similar to my retirement schedule at home — early dinner, early bed. It must be barely seven when we're herded back to the multicellular dorm. Not having a clock doesn't bother me. I haven't worn a wrist watch since the late 1990s, and have rediscovered my biological clock before handphones became part of the biology. I can usually tell time to plus or minus fifteen minutes, give or take another fifteen minutes.

Business is good today. Hong Kong is becoming a crime capital. LCK is approaching full occupancy, overflowing with convicts. Many cells have been converted to triple rooms with an extra bed slotted between the two bolted-down ones, turning the cells into one giant bed occupying every inch of floor space but for the toilet and sink area.

I look for Polygamist but can't see him anywhere. Maybe he's had enough of me?

Marlboro, myself, and a bespectacled young man end up sharing a room. We park our identical slippers at the gate, then climb onto bed. Marlboro takes the far side below the elevated toilet. Obviously, he doesn't mind, or is being super courteous, which is entirely possible. I slide opportunistically to the opposite side. The young man crawls into the middle, mumbling something which sounds like 'Well, well, well. Nice!' Maybe he's being sarcastic. But he seems relaxed and comfortable right away. Hey, jail can't be that bad if so many regulars feel at home here, I tell myself. He looks in his late twenties, friendly and talkative, phlegmatic and neurotic at the same time. Half his teeth are missing, making him look more mature, and guilty. Did he lose them in a fight? He doesn't look the warrior type though. Maybe he's a practice punching bag for fellow gangsters?

As I stealthily observe him, he stretches out his feet towards mine.

OMG, they — his feet — are sloughing off big time before my tired old eyes. This can't be true, but *is* true, I am sharing a bed with him!

I discretely back away, pushing tight against the cool damp wall.

His feet are chalky white, fluffy and powdery as if made of loose dust, the raw material with which God manufactured Adam. Within minutes, he has deposited a film of snowy human powder onto his blanket. If Marlboro is bothered, he's not showing it. I'm ostensibly indifferent as well. The courtesy prisoners afford each other is unimaginable to the polite world outside.

Well, his feet are here to stay. They are now a central component of objective reality. The only sensible option is acceptance. Fortunately, no strange odour detected so far. Life could have been worse, as always.

We chat, hopping between a wide range of issues — from the petty current Chief Executive of government to arbitrary justice, something we all have insights into. If Quasimodo would kindly serve beer and chips, and the young man's decomposing feet were collected inside socks and shoes, tugged under a table, this could indeed be an enjoyable Flower Lounge soirée.

My interlocutors are not sophisticated by the superficial standards of sophisticated folks. But they are genuine, and refreshingly full of common sense. They can be bafflingly uninformed about some trivial aspects at the social dead end where I once ensconced myself, but

tremendously insightful in other areas. They're street smart, healthily cynical (or realistic, depending how cynical or realistic you are), generally tolerant and accepting without fuss. The streets keep people on their mettle more ruthlessly than the bourgeois matrix does. For some reason, I don't think it's appropriate to ask Flaky Feet what he's in for, so I won't.

Tiredness sinks in like a heart attack. I haven't slept for nearly forty hours.

I crawl under the blanket, too tired to mumble goodnight. The light stays on — it's always on. My eyelids crash down. A pair of feet is disintegrating in semi-darkness. There's a silent explosion nearby. A cloud of pulverised skin propagates towards my face. Pressure wave. Hope it's not contagious.

I wake from a dreamless sleep to the sound of birds. Even in the slammer, daybreak is tranquil. Flaky is sleeping like a deformed baby, a second-generation victim of nuclear holocaust, snoring gently, blowing sweet viscous bubbles, momentarily freed from a crumbling existence.

His glasses! He sleeps with his glasses on! I nearly scream over nothing.

Better keep an open mind about *normality* from now on, I make another mental note. Normal is merely an accepted collection of all the odd things I'm accustomed to. What's the big deal about sleeping with one's glasses on, huh?

Day Three has begun. I stretch my back, then reach down for my slippers near the entrance. Oh, there're three identical pairs underneath, six shoes, six feet, fluffy or not. Oh well, I pick two, put them on at the other end of bed, then climb the toilet, getting ready for more imprisonment.

There's a conspicuously wretched guy today at the table across the aisle, behind the one which rejected me yesterday. He's been staring at the floor all morning, nearly motionless. Reality has become even stranger than usual. I struggle not to stare at him staring at nothing, while my table-mate stares at me. Them two should be introduced to each other. Unfortunately, both are preoccupied at the moment.

After lunch, us new admissions are sent to take *Dead Beam* (X-Ray) at the *Fingerprint Room* (Admin Office). Nearly everything is called something else. I'm an alien in a strange country with an arcane language.

To foreign inmates such as John, the opposite is true. Everything concerning them is distilled down to two letters — ON — barked out with Cantonese pungency — *Oh-Ann!* Polygamist and Marlboro cannot tell me what ON stands for. They only know it represents everything non-Chinese under the sun, inside a Hong Kong jail. Could it be the acronym for *Other Nationals?* Besides the usual suspects who make up Hong Kong's cosmopolitan demography, there's an inordinately high proportion of Latin Americans and Africans in LCK's ON population.

My package arrives.

I find Christmas carols cheesy, so am devastated to notice *Jingle Bells* jingling against my will in the head.

At the front gate, an officer inserts my newly gifted chattels through the bars. Right next to him, crumbled up on the floor, is an empty plastic bag, obviously without further purpose in life. I beg him for it. He hesitates briefly — he actually hesitates over a useless plastic bag for a good ten seconds! — before giving it to me. Truly grateful nonetheless.

Thank you thank you! Hmm Goy Hmm Goy, Ah Sir!

Back at Table 33.

Ha! Ten packs of pocket size Tempos — *Mwah!* Two blue capped yellowish ballpoint pens. I know this kind from younger days. Not a small miracle that the indisputably ugly design has actually survived the decades. They look lovely now. Four notebooks. *Yahoo!* Turn up that jingle bell. An electric shaver. I never use them. I much prefer razor blades but, yeah, I'm not in a hotel. Batteries, mosquito repellant stickers, one proper face towel, and, and, and, a *soap box!* My own soap box!

I insist that Marlboro takes a full pack of tissues. With nine left, I still need to conserve. The little bar of soap goes into its glossy new home which snaps shut with a sweet audible click. I open and close it a few times — *click! click! click!*

Everything's engraved or written with a permanent marker 365820, property of inmate $365820 - c'est\ moi,\ Monsieur!$

The notebooks conjure up childhood memories. Cheap but functional things were popular back then. I pick one up for closer examination. It's brandname Gambol is by far the most prominent feature on the pastel beige semi-glossy cover. Right below it is the word NOTEBOOK in capitals to ensure proper understanding of the designed function of this paper article. Underneath is a bold declaration: *Gambol notebooks, made with future technology, for tomorrow's most outstanding achievers*. It's obviously not for me then. I'm too old to be an outstanding achiever tomorrow. Who cares. I have never possessed anything made with technologies which don't yet exist — imagine the privilege and excitement. I sniff it to savour the scent of future. Smells like paper. I immediately set to write, mostly in English, hoping in vain that the foreign language would afford me some privacy.

A few inmates drop by to watch behind my shoulders, creating an aura of curious body heat.

'You write in English?'

'Yeah, just practising.'

'Cool.'

I jot down everything I can recollect — observations, dialogues, reflections, commentaries, inspirations, speculations, delusions. Writing in longhand is hard on my keyboard-evolved fingers, but I persevere. All muscles are trainable. Evolution can be reversed by necessity.

A few hours flit past. Dinner's ready. I put the notebook back into my plastic bag, and place it on the bench. From the food line, I look back several times to make sure nobody steals my notebook. This place is full of thieves according to the Guardian Angel. I don't care about the other items, but one notebook has now been initiated, serving as a removable hard-disk of my

brain. And the tissues, needless to mention. Us bourgeois are characteristically neurotic with petty possessions.

After dinner, return to the grottoes. Evening parties promptly resume.

Inmates are assigned a different cell every night, but the guards normally permit free association; we can pick our roommates. This pragmatic latitude helps minimise night-time troubles. Tonight, I share a room with Marlboro and a chubby young man called Joe. Occupancy is still high. Joe's a friendly and talkative shoplifter. He had come over to our table earlier this morning to introduce himself.

His case is even more unremarkable than mine. He had stolen a pack of chicken wings (nearly expired according to him, which is not only dumb, but also not an acceptable defence in my lay opinion) and two cans of mushrooms, totalling HK\$60, from a ParknShop supermarket. For petty thefts, the police usually let the *victim* decide whether to press charges or not. The supermarket insisted on prosecution: 'It isn't the money, but a matter of principle.' A magistrate sentenced Joe to forty days and forty nights in jail — two-third day for each American dime's worth of stolen but unconsumed goods to uphold the moral principle of one of two main supermarket chains in Hong Kong. He'll serve out his short sentence in LCK.

Joe prattles on about his life, which doesn't sound very eventful until now. He lives with his grandparents in Wan Chai, not a housing project. They are neither rich nor poor, and his life neither easy nor tough. He doesn't pretend to have a heartrending reason to shoplift. Maybe he only wants attention, or to experience prison? Perhaps he's a kleptomaniac?

Flaky, notwithstanding his unstable dermatological condition, was infinitely more interesting. I did not see him all day. Has he *Guo Gai*? Or turned unto dust, gone with the wind?

* * *

See Hings

Fan Tong — the all purpose Common Room — is a menagerie of *See Hings* from various hidden paths of life. It's a fascinating place to spend the day, even weeks, people watching, though three years would be a bit tedious.

Polygamist has *Guo Gai* to a proper jail the day after he enquired. Someone must have dropped his file under the table. Didn't get a chance to say goodbye or thank him for saving me from a vulnerable moment, though he might have found that odd. Marlboro is my new mentor. The morning after we shared a bed with Flaky, he told me the young man's bizarre dermatology is a common symptom of overindulging in *ice*, aka methyl-amphetamine to multi-syllable folks who don't do drugs or take public transport.

After breakfast, he hands me a news clipping of my verdict, expecting me to get excited over my own misfortune. If Jesus were crucified today, I suspect the apostles would line up to show him video clips of the crucifixion as soon as he emerged from his three-day death with gaping wounds.

My case, summed up in a few hundred words, is a long distance from the headline. Most *See Hings*, Marlboro included, comb through the tabloids, sometimes repeatedly to pass the excess time they've been awarded for having sinned. The brief account is surprisingly positive, even sympathetic for a Hong Kong journal. The reporter must have been new to the business. He even quotes the judge's contradictory remarks about us being victims rather than villains, but does not question why well-behaving victims are sentenced to jail. It ends with a sensational description of Satu turning into a 'tear person' upon hearing the verdict.

'Wow, not many errors.' I comment lightheartedly as I hand it back to him.

'You can keep it.'

'It's okay. Thanks very much. I don't need it.' He seems surprised.

I'm not a mainstream media follower, and have not bothered to keep a media file on the fiasco. Not because they bring back terrible memories. To me, it's an insipid case of simple bad luck which I've been trying to endure with detachment. The spattering of news reports, circulated by PR colleagues at the time, were mostly cut and paste from ICAC press releases — yawn inducing, full of glaring inaccuracies and fabricated details designed to mislead. They are not worth the trouble of reading, not to say saving.

During the trial, young journalists occasionally showed up in the courtroom for an air-con break. They looked terminally indifferent to the tiring theatrics of wigged players debating twenty-first century disputes in nineteenth century language, smugly inserting Latin words occasionally to impress a largely empty gallery. Within minutes, an overworked and underpaid

agent of the free press would snooze, drool, and snore, until a notebook or cellphone drops from his lap. The judge would raise his eyes to silently reprimand. Those not good at power-napping would typically stay for only five to ten minutes, just long enough to recover from the sun and traffic fumes. They would then bow their exit, walk backward for a few steps like dynastic eunuchs. The ICAC will keep them informed of the progress with press releases written in a readily publishable format, complete with interpretation hints. In modern journalism, observation and literary skills are secondary to proficiency in *cut-and-paste*, and toeing the editorial line.

Many *See Hings* are regulars. They know the system, the routine, some of the inmates, and many of the guards. When marshalled past each other in the courtyard or sitting interminably at Fingerprint Room without knowing why — something that happens a lot to prisoners — they often yell out to each other.

'Hay! You again? Dew Lay Lo Mo! You just fucking got out!'

A big smile in return.

'What the fuck for this time?' Glad to note that even seasoned *See Hings* ask the same preambular question.

An emphatic shrug would be a common reply. Announcing one's crime across the room would amount to a self-infringement of privacy. In addition, some convicts actually don't know, or care, why they're here. Those who break laws for a living expect periodic imprisonment. Only a matter of time. Part of the job. Official reasons are mere technicality, almost irrelevant. If one parks illegally everyday, the exact time and location on the eventual ticket is not important even if it contains inaccurate details. That's the spirit.

'How long?'

A few fingers go up. Their owner giggles, nearly blushing. It's prudent to display modesty when a career record has been broken.

'Hoooly fuck!'

Was that commiseration? Admiration? Compliment? Or just a polite response?

The Common Room reminds me of corporate conferences.

These days, it's fashionable to 'lock away' executives for corporate reviews and strategy brainstorming, usually on an island resort in Greece, or Thailand, or Morocco, depending on the Chairman's preference, or whether a major deal has recently been struck with a scenic country. During coffee breaks, men — very few women if the company is French — dressed in virtually identical outfits, gather in small groups to gossip, boast unverifiable contributions, claim credits, drop names, suggest the next big move as if privy to it, share hindsights, and roll eyes to demonstrate a degree of independent thinking.

That's exactly what the scene before me at LCK looks like right now.

The body language is also similar — expansive gestures to hide the man underneath, scanning eyes to seek out contacts, opportunities, friends and competitors, as the mouth talks

through a corner. Smiles are measured, slyly uncommitted, smeared with latent messages. Senior members nod absentmindedly. The young and ambitious whisper urgently.

Though prison uniforms are even more regimented than corporate suits, convicts come in a richer variety of size, shape and appearance, wearing a broader range of facial expressions.

See Hings mill past in perpetual circulation; I absorb them into my daydreams, judging, imagining, philosophising, fantasising, making notes to mark time and amuse myself. In just a few days, I have nearly filled an entire notebook.

I assign them stations and roles in gangland.

Those two I noted on my first day are General Manager material, reporting directly to Godfather. They stand out from the crowd, radiating prominence.

That smiley little guy over there, flicking a sharp tongue across jagged teeth, is probably a court jester. I'll bet you can smack him over his greasy head and he'd laugh and thank you if you're more powerful. Otherwise, he would torture you to a slow death, giggling all the way.

Now, this one gliding past in oversized slippers is obviously a snake. His glassy eyeballs and seashell ears spook me. He's hissing hypnotically to a silvery old man who looks like a professor of art history. The professor nods inattentively, not trusting the serpent, yet giving him his time, probably devising a plan to domesticate him for other use, or eat him for dinner.

There must be a colourful tale behind each of them, though 'colourful' seems a stupid attempt to romanticise poverty. Poverty? Are they necessarily *poor*, though? What's contemporary indigence like in Hong Kong, where those fallen into destitution suffer from obesity and junk food indigestion rather than hunger? LCK *Fan Tong* is a most inspiring setting for idle reverie, while fellow criminals prepare dinner in a hidden kitchen.

Starvation poverty has long been superseded by the *public housing conundrum*, a background shared by many guards and inmates. I have plenty of praise for Hong Kong's public housing policy, but everything has a dark side, or a bright side darkened by time. Such is life.

Starvation poverty is like a leg-hold trap. If caught, it hurts like hell. The victims struggle with all they have, whatever it takes. Cut that careless leg off if necessary. The alternative is death. Public-housing poverty, on the other hand, is numbing, not threatening. In fact, it doesn't even resemble poverty, and is well above global poverty line.

Contemporary urban deprivation is a social blackhole. Inside it, time and events have collapsed. Nothing breaks free from its enormous gravity, not even light. Looking out from it, the world looks warped beyond comprehension — a parallel reality. Unlike leg-hold traps, blackholers don't feel existentially threatened as they shrink relentlessly, becoming smaller, denser, until no more, yet without losing weight. Mere negligible mass to the bottomless sink, fuelling its insatiable gravity. There's no escape. There's nowhere to escape to.

Nearly half of Hong Kong live in public housing.

The earliest resettlement shelters, hastily and contemptuously built in the 1950s and 60s, were ratholes which make LCK look five-star. Yet the occupants were spirited and optimistic. Not

long ago, they had been resettled from matchbox slums perched on slippery slopes. The roof over their heads was now 'permanent', made of weather proof reinforced concrete. The force of nature had been removed from the equation. There were even shared toilets with flushing mechanisms, one on each floor, how about that? Furthermore, this was temporary. Everything was merely a transition to a better tomorrow. They will move out one day if they worked hard, of course, perhaps to a mansion with a double garage on the Peak, guarded by a big fat hairy steak-fed dog. If not themselves, well, maybe their children, or grandchildren. With that 'one day' firmly in mind, even hardship had a sweet aftertaste.

Back then, nearly everyone was poor. Mr. Li Ka Shing was broke. Though I grew up in relatively comfortable Mid-Levels, me and my sister had to help assemble plastic flowers during summer holidays, a popular piecemeal home industry to supplement household income. Leaf by leaf, cent by cent, everyone contributed to Hong Kong's growing GDP. To work hard was honourable, fashionable, admirable. Work harder, and tomorrow will be better. Work much harder, tomorrow will be much better. The correlation was plain, simple, reassuring, like primary school math, like religion. Application will speed up the arrival of that one day.

Looking up the social ladder, they saw only a few colonials massaging their beer bellies with eyes closed. Plenty of vacancies and opportunities. Hong Kong was a greyhound track. Driven by instincts, young people raced after 'one day' — the mechanical rabbit was always nearly within reach. Even losers got a good workout chasing dreams.

Gradually, thanks to their hard work, public flats became air-conditioned sanctuaries with private bathrooms. Toilet bowls are fitted with two sized buttons — big one for big dumps, small one for minor discharges. Kitchens are cramped by food processors and microwaves and pasta machines. The living rooms are taken up by giant flat-screen televisions capable of 3D illusions. Their homes are connected to community centres, gyms, squash and tennis courts with clear markings, shopping malls, sushi bars, foot massage parlours, parking lots. Outdoor greenery is guaranteed by statutory plot ratio and contract specifications.

But the invisible boundary has turned impermeable, confining the tenants and their kids to cheap rent and vibrant gangs. *One day* had fallen into the black hole, compressed into an unidentifiable dream, infinitely dense. The Hare-son Hare — that elusive mechanical bait — has vanished.

There are real rabbits around though, meaty and dead, strewn all over the track. Eat it!

Decades of breathless work ethic has resulted in an excess of material success which Hong Kong is too busy to digest, yet too insecure to step back and ruminate before moving forward. The government is single-mindedly lost in a twentieth century *laissez-faire* maze, clinging to the decomposing corpse of capitalism in a cul-de-sac, doesn't know how to let go.

It may stink a little now, but don't let go. It once worked. Keep repeating the same thing, and the results maybe better one day. We vowed not to change for fifty years, remember?

Meanwhile, as Hong Kong moulders away in stagnant prosperity, the rest of the world moves on at a dazzling speed.

Perpetual growth is a capitalistic chimera no more achievable than everlasting life. At some point, a community reaches its limitations. To move on, it must digest, rethink, and seek rebirth.

The aphorism 'Wealth doesn't last three generations' is based on experience, not ill wish. After a critical cluster of monster parents have stocked up enough to last another five wasteful generations, there's not much left for laggers and new comers. The pie has been divided, claimed, eaten. Leftovers have been stowed in the freezer, locked up. Upper rungs on the social ladder are fully occupied. The incumbents, guaranteed by law, bequeath privileged positions to their heirs regardless of merit. Their kids are born *successful*. Traditional inheritance rights combined with Chinese saving habits have turned affluent kids into vegetables, and the not-yet-haves into grassroots.

Property prices define Hong Kong; everything else is a consequence. These days, even property tycoons acknowledge that real-estates are unaffordable, yet selling ridiculously well. Paradoxically, Hong Kong has one of the higher private ownership rates in the world. Where's the money from? No, not outsiders, not according to facts and statistics. It's the monster daddies.

In the distant past, when I was a young man, the price of commodities reflected the earning power of my peers. Nowadays, a bright and 'successful' young man, making twice as much as his buddies, does not qualify for subsidised housing because he makes too much. Yet he can't afford a toilet-size flat in the commercial market dominated by his dumb classmates' daddies. He can't match the previous generation's purchasing power. The market isn't fair. It doesn't adjust for balance — never has, never will, except for brief transition periods. But recognising this economic reality is being disloyal to capitalistic beliefs, sacrilegious in Hong Kong.

In Man's Last Song, a book I finished before coming to jail, I compare excessive inheritance in a capitalistic system to the inequity of a feudal society. The modern version is in fact more robust, more difficult to rebel against, therefore more unjust and cynical.

Poor bastards are now called *grassroots*, a green and refreshing metaphor which suggests that their underfoot station is part of nature's design. Willing to think, travel, and work overtime won't improve their situations anymore. Being aware only makes life more unbearable, poisoning it with a bitter sense of injustice. When a bright young man with money-deficient parents looks ahead, the future is static and dark, shrouded in despair. Meanwhile, his stupid and lazy classmate brags about his new smart phone. He decides to get one too, by hook or by crook. When fate turns the wrong way, as it often does, he ends up here, becomes my *See Hing*.

Prison is a cage where grassroots are locked away, watched by other grassroots, so people above them may enjoy social harmony and economic freedom undisturbed.

My mental free-fall into Hong Kong's socio-economic blackhole is interrupted by a young man in his mid-twenties.

'Hi, I'm Joe.'

Another Joe?

Earlier, a shoplifter called Joe came over to chat. If I had a son, I don't think I should name him Joe.

He extends his hand. I shake it. Haven't seen anyone shake hands around here. I bet we look really weird.

I saw him reading John Man's semi-fiction *Genghis Khan* earlier. Though it's always a pleasure to meet book readers of any kind, I wonder why he's picked me for conversation.

That Guardian Angel thing is about to say something. I stop it cold.

Shut up! I can handle this myself. Scat! Go whisper about me into God's ear.

'I read about your case in the paper,' Joe II explains. Apparently, press coverage, albeit in the appendix of tabloids, has turned me into a minor celebrity inside this uneventful enclosure. Young people like celebrities, I suppose, even inconsequential, unentertaining, and reluctant ones.

Joe II has a strong and intelligent face savagely marred by pockmarks. I wish I had my camera.

So, Joe, what're you in for buddy?

His story is somewhat baffling, like real life.

He's a computer technician living in a remote corner of rural New Territories — a corner so remote by Hong Kong standards as to be shunted by mainstream gangsters. Buses only run every fifteen minutes, and taxis are painted green. Having noticed a market vacuum, Joe and associates formed their own protection racket as a sideline venture, becoming start-up Triads. One day, after beating up some illegal squatters who refused to pay, he grabbed the wrong backpack when getting away in a hurry. Soon he realised the mixup, and ran back for his own. The cops were waiting.

Hmm. Returning to the crime scene for his backpack is pretty reckless, if not outright stupid, isn't it?

He must have read my mind. 'It was shit luck. The guy had the same fucking backpack. Double shit luck that the cops were so fucking fast. They're bored out of their minds, you see. Triple shit fucking luck that my ID was in the bag. They'd have come to me anyway.' Carrying his own ID card in the backpack when committing a crime? An amateur after all.

After chatting me up, eloquent and friendly Joe II moseys on to befriend other inmates. Listening to him telling stories, I'm impressed by his knowledge of Hong Kong and the small world beyond, not something which can be taken for granted in his generation. He seems a natural leader among younger inmates. He's fluent in colloquial English, and doesn't exclude foreign inmates in his fraternising excursions.

Solicitor Derek once told me prisons are full of idiots. He's partly right. There's no shortage of strange characters here. I've got one sitting opposite me. But there are quite a few young men displaying human qualities which have become rare in more comfortable circles.

It's a pity that Joe II has ended up on the murky side of things. On the other hand, would it not be equally 'a pity' if such a lively young person joins the Government Treasury as certified accountant, carrying a lifetime mortgage on his back until retirement? I don't have an answer.

An exuberant group of about half a dozen black-workers — illegal migrant workers from the mainland — appeared at the adjacent table, invigorating our section with the vibes of a good harvest. Once caught, migrant workers get about fifteen months semi-automatically to protect local labourers who don't want these jobs. Computers would be far more efficient and consistent than wigged humans in judging these cases. Most of them have sturdy muscles which Hong Kong needs, but resents. Not all are here to labour, of course. Some sneak in to do a quick job, but are not quick enough to sneak back out. They also end up here in LCK.

Among them is a teenage looking kid with thick glasses. He must have been at least twenty-one to be here though. All morning, through the corners of my very eyes, I see him translating the newspaper into English. Something's very insane. I finally ask Marlboro if he knows what the boy's in for. Marlboro's a mystery. He doesn't go around to gossip, but seems fully informed about what's going on, and who's who in this room, at least those who have kind of made it to the newspapers.

'You don't know?'

Well, I wouldn't have asked if I did, would I?

I must seem a contradiction to him: An educated person who doesn't know anything, or read the newspaper, demonstrating no interest even in his own news.

According to Marlboro, the kid was caught ghostwriting in last year's high-school public exam, and became a minor celebrity through arrest.

'That's all? An exam? You don't go to jail for that do you?'

'Yes you do. Ask him,' he rolls his eyes in the boy's direction. 'Especially mainlanders.'

'I see.'

So, reportedly, the heavily bespectacled kid accepted an assignment to write an exam in Hong Kong for a couple of grand, something which I suspect many smart and adventurous youngsters would find hugely gratifying for the ego in addition to a free trip to Hong Kong. What social harm has been caused by his irresponsible action, though? Is there a remote possibility that the dummy whom he impersonated would end up in university, and continue to commission ghostwriters for the endless tests awaiting him in the years ahead? Is there any chance that he would finish medical school without a brain, becoming a terrible doctor, causing countless innocent deaths? Life entails far too many exams to delegate to phantoms.

The young man probably thought too lightly about his illegitimate employment. Youthful eyes are blind to consequences. Fine, what he did deserves punishment. But ten months...oh well, this will teach him the erratic nature of justice, something I've just learned belatedly at my age.

Perhaps his peasant mates have never seen foreigners within touching distance before, and seem particularly intrigued whenever one shows up. They pester the boy to interpret. Why's he in jail? Where's he from? Does he have kids? Boys? Girls? Does he eat Chinese food at home? Can he handle eating rice everyday?

He obliges with a fatalistic grimace. His strongly accented but proper English is impressive, much better than his average peers in Hong Kong. Perhaps that's why he was hired.

The appearance of a jolly Peruvian absolutely electrifies his table.

Señor Amigo parades his gunshot wound on his chest to collect *likes* and *wows*. It's an enthralling scar indeed, featuring three-dimensional folds and ridges stemming from a meaty depression just below the collar bone — presumably the entry point of the bullet. It resembles a cosmic constellation. To the black-workers, Amigo's arrival is more thrilling than a caravan of acrobats showing up at their sleepy village one morning unexpected. They swarm the young man, prodding him to find out more, six questions at a time.

Ask him. Ask him. How was he shot? Why? Did it hurt? Did the bullet go through? Got stuck? Did it burn? Did the wound smoke? Did someone remove it with pliers?

To my surprise, the kid's conversational Spanish is *muy bueno!* My brief attempt to learn Spanish eons ago had given me enough background to be genuinely impressed.

I like the young stranger without knowing him, so am probably being overly sympathetic. But focusing on the bright side, he'll have plenty of time to think and write in the months ahead, and be inoculated with cynicism. That's maturity. He's been shown the essence of Rule of Law a la Hong Kong. Marlboro says the employer and his stupid son were not charged. I find that incredible, but won't bother to verify. The older I get, the more I believe that everyone will have to face the consequence of his action sooner or later, one way or the other.

The wretched man across the aisle is still staring at the floor today. His table-mate, an old guy, offers him a drag of his cigarette butt. He draws deeply without exhaling or loosening his gaze. The old man probably smells fingers sizzling, and gestures him urgently to throw it out the window. He gets up, walks over to the window, flicks whatever's left of the butt out onto the basketball court below, then resumes monitoring the surface movement of planet Earth.

Not all black-workers are mainlanders.

One morning, a Caucasian giant enters, wearing pants many sizes too small. He settles at the table behind us, then gets up after a few minutes to prevent blood clots. We make friendly eye contact when he walks past. Finally, he stops by: 'You speak English?' He sounds Eastern European.

'Yes, want to sit?'

'No thanks. I prefer standing.' He rocks gently. Doctors would probably advise against sitting in those tight pants. The contrived smile on his melancholic mouth belies his discomfort.

Born and raised in Poland, he immigrated to the States years ago. He has a small partnership in Hong Kong selling Chinese prefab huts to India, helping to give Indian urban slums a Mediterranean look. He overstayed his visitor visa by more than a year, and here he is.

'The stupid thing is I could have renewed my tourist visa easily. A day trip to Macau and back would have done it.' He widens his smile with effort. How could any judge not believe someone who looks like an emoji for honesty? 'But I was busy and didn't think it a big deal, so didn't bother.'

Is that all?

I glance at his Prisoner's ID. It says 'Breach of Condition of Stay,' nothing else.

Not long ago, a friend discovered at a police road-block that his driving license had expired five years ago. A one-year lapse of the visa doesn't seem so unthinkable. Anyway, for that, he got thrown into a jail designed for smaller people.

Marlboro and I end up being cellmates for a few nights.

In the privacy of our barred en suite, he's haltingly more talkative, revealing bits and pieces about himself. In a deep drowsy monotone, he sounds like a dying soldier in a war trench, one leg freshly missing, oozing blood infused with morphine. Perhaps it's his voice, or the setting, his mostly ordinary tales of poverty are deeply moving.

He was a chauffeur, living in government housing with Mum who had fallen terminally ill. He quit his job to take care of her, and depended on welfare for survival. Having only each other in this world is easy to imagine, but difficult to empathise without personal experience.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, Mum died soon after. Meanwhile, he had assumed that his welfare status had been shared between government departments — which sounds commonsensical enough — and neglected to formally inform the Housing Department about it. Also possible that he couldn't bring himself to formalise his rockbottom status on a piece of bureaucratic paper, hence the omission? No matter, because of that, he lost the right to inherit the flat, and got removed to a temporary shelter.

'Why?'

'Don't know. That's the rule.' I suppose rules are rules.

He started smuggling cigarettes part-time, as many in his situation do. 'I knew getting caught would only be a matter of time,' he gives a *c'est la vie* shrug, no bitterness. But he gets slightly worked up when relaying the judge's personal reprimand. 'You should know that breaking the law for merely five hundred dollars is dumb,' the wigged man told him, wagging a finger.

'I wanted to ask him what amount would make it intelligent. Five thousand? Five million? Five hundred bucks are a lot to me!'

'You didn't!'

'Of course not, or I'd be in for much longer. They hate bad manners, everyone knows. Always look sad and stupid in court, mouth shut and head down.' Come to think of it, John and I probably looked far too smart-arse, even arrogant in body language at times. Perhaps we deserve this after all.

'They make such a big deal about cigarette smuggling, but won't go ahead and ban it,' I say sympathetically in his moral defence.

'Government would lose a lot of money in that case,' he explains with reason, not sarcasm. How weird.

'I know many who evade tax legally with professional advice. They won't break the law for five hundred bucks though. That's for sure,' I mumble, wondering if he gets my point.

'Yeah, the judge said it's stupid.'

* * *

Transfer

March 5th, day six. A giant boil has appeared on my left inner thigh overnight.

I have never seen a boil this size before, much less owned one. Given the complexity of the ecosystem I'm in, and the high-humidity blankets, some kind of skin disease is entirely reasonable, even inevitable. But boils usually emerge gradually, with warning signs, a development process which biologists could follow from formation to maturity and make notes. Not this one. There wasn't the slightest hint of its arrival when I went to bed last night. While I slept, it grew from nothing to the size of a quail egg, amassing an astonishing quantity of what I assume must be pus within hours. The human body is indeed magical.

In addition to the boil, a flu is gathering strength in me.

I'm under attack. Trillions of bugs are unhappy, or overly happy, taking advantage of my condition.

Marlboro says medical officers are just common jailers in a yellowish lab coat, something which they take turn donning. I cannot verify his claim, but from their coarse language and mannerism, the medics certainly don't act like conventional professionals. Their routine tasks do not really demand expertise, however. One of them visits *Fan Tong* twice daily, mostly to collect urine and hand out Panadol to anyone complaining about illness. Inmates with medical conditions such as hypertension or diabetes also receive their meds prescribed by real doctors.

Regardless of whether it is hydrochlorothiazide or just good old Panadol, inmates take it with wide open mouth. The medic would place the pill at the back of the tongue, withdraw fingers, then command: 'Swallow!'

He'll inspect the mouth again before kicking his patient away to admit the next.

When it's my turn, I show my boil and look at him with wide astonished eyes. There's no need to say anything.

Look! Just look! Scary right? Ah Sir. Seen them this big before? Am I dying?

'Wa!' he exclaims after a quick glance.

Even he's impressed. I have not overreacted.

Keeping his distance, probably worrying about contagion, he squeezes a big blob of yellowish gooey unguent, like the greasy gunk on old car battery terminals, onto my palm.

'Go! Next!' he barks.

After dressing the boil generously with the unguent, I save the excess in an old Tempo wrapper and rub my greasy palm against the right thigh in case boils come in symmetrical pairs. Prevention is better than cure. Prison is generally progressive in terms of environmental practice. Things that non-prisoners toss out without a second thought actually have plenty of useful life left. Tempo wrappers are great for keeping loose items such as ointment and postage stamps, for example. I could use half a dozen of them. Unfortunately, no one throws them away.

Flower Lounge Transfer

After breakfast, the morning messenger arrives, creating a commotion as usual. My number is on the list this time. I'm to go to the Fingerprint Room with half a dozen others.

We're queuing outside the duty inspector's office, to be admitted one by one. In my early school years, I had to stand outside the principal's office periodically, waiting to be reminded of the consequence of behaving like a normal school boy in his medieval institution. I know the etiquette well: No talking back, no questions. Just say *yes Sir!*

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'365820?'
'Yes sir.'
'You're going to Tong Fuk.'
'Yes sir.'
'Okay, out.'
'Thank you, sir.'
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Ah Sir says I'm going to Tong Fuk. It's in Lantau, I think. Never been very good with locations and directions. I wonder how I will get there. By a big black bus, I assume. When? Oh well, all will be clear in the fullness of time.

Feels strange to be moving out of the supposedly worst jail in Hong Kong soon. LCK is a hellhole according to Derek, whose only firsthand knowledge of jail is the visiting rooms. Still, chances are I'll be relocated to better living conditions. But I have just started to feel settled here. After the emotional tremors and aftershocks of the past week, I have a deeply irrational wish to hang on to anything familiar, even a hellhole. If I were allowed to choose, I might just stay where I am, until — until whenever.

I must be looking as perplexed as I feel. An Indian officer walks over and asks: 'Guo Gai Hui Bin Ah?' Where're you transferring to?

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'Tong Fuk Ah, Ah Sir.'
'Good place.'
'Really?' I smile, wondering what his definition of good is.
'Go tell your family right now.'
'How?'
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He points to the social workers' office. 'Ask them to call your family and say you're going to Tong Fuk tomorrow.' When he mentions 'your family', I have a spontaneous urge to cry. These strange emotional ambushes are sharp and abrupt. I hold back inexplicable tears and thank him profusely. 'Ng Goi Sai, Ah Sir.'

Seriously, I must have been a good guy in my past life. Most of my friends complain about taxi drivers. They speak from experiences which contradict mine. Nine out of ten cabbies I've encountered are friendly and helpful. Now that I'm in jail, I also find most prisoners and jail guards generous and kind.

Flower Lounge Transfer

'Quick. They'll get off soon.'

I salute him again, and run as fast as I can in flip-flops.

The door is closed. Knock knock. No response. I push it open, gingerly. A few non-uniform men stop talking and turn to goggle at me. One gives me the standard what-the-fuck-do-youwant look.

'Ah Sir, I'm about to Guo Gai.'

'So?'

'Can you let my wife know?'

He gives me a small piece of paper. 'Write down your name, and your wife's name and number.'

'Thank you, Ah Sir.'

He actually smiles back at me. Folks here can be helpful, but they never smile at us cons. That was nice.

After visiting the social workers, I wait outside. I now know how things work. Just wait, and things will happen. Now that I've sent a message to Satu, I feel more excited about the move, charged with anticipation about being sent to another prison. After an indeterminate period of time, an officer collects us to go back to the Common Room. *Guo Gai* will only take place tomorrow.

Imminent transferees sleep on the eighth floor. I share a cell with a scholarly looking man. Have not seen him before, must be from another *Fan Tong*. Is he a poet? Let me find out.

'So, what're you in for?'

'Car theft.'

'I see.' Petty crime. 'How long?'

'Twenty months.'

'What!?' As car owner, I don't support car theft. But twenty months? I would regard it excessive even if it were my car that he had stolen. Perhaps he stole a whole ship load? 'How many?'

'One. A used one. But it's my fifth time, you see.'

Five times? Though incorrigible, he obviously regards the penalty reasonable and proportional from a professional viewpoint, and sees no cause for alarm.

We ramble on, like two family men shooting the breeze in a country club sauna. This one is filled with secondhand smoke and vintage ammonia instead of cedar scent.

Car Thief is forty-eight, married with three kids — four, seven, and eleven. He closes his eyes gently when talking about his family. Drifting into felicitous reverie, a smile forms around his mouth. His son, the eleven-year-old, worries him the most. 'Very stubborn,' he shakes his head, then opens his eyes, woken by a troubling side of reality which warrants vigilance.

Could it be hereditary? Insisting on stealing cars again and again, refusing to switch to other commodities, sounds pretty stubborn to me.

Flower Lounge Transfer

'Boys are like that these days, according to my friends with sons,' I say, omitting my speculation on genetic influence. 'Stubborn about nothing, and highly restless indoors.'

'Oh yes. Very restless. Indoors! Spot on. Won't leave the house,' he loses composure for a second. 'Video games you know. Modern opium. Girls seem more normal though, so far.' A sigh turns into smile, probably by the thought of his daughter, followed by another deep sigh.

'They get video games from parents, don't they?' I now know the *See Hings* a little, well enough to challenge this one mildly, safely, on a sincere friendly basis.

'No choice. My wife thinks it's child abuse if we don't give him what he wants. Plus I think they can get it online now.'

I have no idea. Electronic opium is not a problem at my home, fingers crossed. Don't wish to comment further on this subject. We take a brief silent break. The neighbours are much calmer tonight. Mixing inmates from different Common Rooms must have dampened the party mood.

'I miss my daughters most,' he finally says, half to himself.

'Me too. My young one's eight, similar age.'

'Really? Lovely age.'

He does whatever it takes to make life as comfortable as possible for his family. As being jailed every now and then is part of the job, he steers clear of anything carrying a stiff sentence. 'Some people work overseas for long periods. Just the same,' he rationalises. The family has arranged its affairs around his periodic absence.

He grew up in a hillside squatter hut, the dim end of the poverty spectrum in the 1960s.

'The slammer isn't that bad comparing with the tin can home of my childhood' His tone suggests that I have no personal experience to verify his comparison. 'My dad and I had to lie on the roof to stop it from flying off during typhoons, holding onto boulders.'

'Wow!' My sincere admiration. Hong Kong was successful for a reason. I had heard a very similar account from a subcontractor. Maybe every man in the squatter areas slept on the roof hugging a boulder during typhoon attacks.

'Quite hard on my wife though, with three little monkeys.' He comes back to the relatively comfortable hardship of the present.

Alas.

He briefly explains the transfer process, telling me what to expect tomorrow. He knows Tong Fuk well. 'Not a bad pen. Don't worry.' Looks like Tong Fuk has a good reputation, highly recommended by jail guards and inmates. I might have won a lucky draw without knowing.

I take the opportunity to learn more Prison Speak, taking notes as he explains.

Visits are *grave sweeping* — that I know already. X-rays are *dead beams* — know that too. Peeing (often on official command to yield a test sample) is *willow waving*. Picture a line of cons peeing, swaying unhurriedly like willows in the wind, left to right... right to left. Towel is *drag water*. Okay. Soap *slippery stone*. Okay too. Slippers are *watermelons*. A bit puzzling, but my teacher doesn't know the etymology. A *second pair of pants* refers not to garment, but other outstanding charges against a convict, yet to be tried. First-timers are *white hands*; repeaters *black hands*. There'll be more. I set aside a few pages in the notebook for them.

'You'll learn all that in a few days. No need to write down lah!' he laughs.

Jailbirds are extremely heavy users of the expletives. Just a few days of prison life has made me swear more profusely in order not to appear odd. The Car Thief is peculiar in this regard. He hardly swears.

Just before turning in, he mentions that, by the way, some Vietnamese inmate hanged himself not long ago, probably on this floor.

Is he trying to spook me?

'How do you know?'

'A guard told me.'

'Wait a minute!' I look around for something a human could dangle from. The gate, opening all the way to the concrete lintel above, is barely high enough for me to get through. The highest cross-bar at the front grille is less than four feet above ground. 'How's that possible? How tall was he? Three feet?'

'Easy. You use the bed sheet. First pull the knees to the chest. Wrap the sheet tightly around before tying the neck to the bar, then let go and swing. It's called *Dorg Gang*.'

Dorg Gang — neck measurement.

My spine feels frozen.

'What determination...' I finally mutter. 'To do all that within fifteen minutes?' The guards make their rounds every fifteen minutes or so.

'Yup. Happens all the time. I'd say at least a couple of times a year,' he gives me his experienced estimate. 'When there's no hope, they'll find a way. Often ONs with long sentences. When you know you're stuck here for twenty-five years, can't speak the language, no friends, no visitors, nobody to talk to, no nothing, why not?'

'That's so sad.'

I never say *that's so sad*. The phrase is over-uttered by too many who don't mean it. But I do feel eerily saddened by the story.

'Yup,' he yawns, not looking one bit saddened. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

I pull the blanket up, covering my mouth, and close my eyes.

A balled up human, suspended from the grille by bedsheet, swings silently, heavily, above my face. I can't see his hands, but know they're there, held back by humanly impossible willpower.

Grasp the bars! Where are your instincts?

One more second — thousand and one — just one breath less... Just a tad easier than strangling oneself barehanded.

Are his eyes resolutely closed, focusing on escaping a hopeless world? Or defiantly open to watch it being snubbed out, by him. For once, he's calling the shots, taking charge of fate, dangling a few inches from the ground, not giving in, until lights out. What would he do if he knew that fate had made this cruel arrangement for him long ago?

He's stopped swinging. The room is haunted by absolute stillness, suddenly very dark. Not even the floodlight can get through. I await my nightmare's arrival.

No radio blaring out good morning wishes. A welcome change.

I had a dreamless sleep, which seems unreal. Perhaps dreams and reality have become indistinguishable. After brushing his teeth, Car Thief tosses everything into the bin. I'm appalled. Noticing my incredulous stare, he tells me new ones will be issued when we get there. Nonetheless, it seems shockingly *un-prison-like* to do that. I put mine in my transparent plastic bag.

After room-service breakfast this special morning, we carry the beddings downstairs and throw them into a big heap near the building entrance, right on the floor. Would they be washed? Mine certainly didn't have the smell and feel of fresh laundry. We then go to the Fingerprint Room to *wave willows*. Drug tests are mandatory whenever we move between facilities.

Car Thief and I are separated. I wish him luck in my mind. He's a good man, though a lousy thief with a terrible track record.

I wait, and wait, as usual. Waiting without knowing why and for how long doesn't bother me any more. I've decided it's a relaxing way to savour life. All things exquisite take getting used to.

Can't help thinking about the Vietnamese *See Hing*. What had he done to get a stiff sentence? Those born into war-torn countries can be vicious, they say. Death takes on very different meaning and dimension to those who have seen too much of it. Having 'nobody to talk to' doesn't sound like a legitimate reason though. If I were jailed in a strange-tongue land, with nobody to talk to for twenty-five years, I'd learn the language. Given a quarter of a century, it must be possible to learn anything, even Icelandic poems. Maybe he had been traumatised by the radio broadcast, and found Cantonese impossible? Alas. May he rest in peace.

Finally, something's happening.

I'm cuffed up with a middle-aged *See Hing*. We exchange nods absentmindedly, lost in respective thoughts. He looks friendly and harmless.

Two by two, we march to a CSD caged van. The trip to nearby Stonecutters Island Pier takes no more than ten minutes. There, we board a prison vessel from a Government pier not open to the public.

On the boat, we are un-cuffed inside a sizeable cage with rows of benches. All that space, just the two of us. About ten other inmates are headed for Hei Ling Chau, a drug rehab island which was once a leper colony. Drugs are more popular in Hong Kong than I thought. They share another hold, and will get off first.

The flu bugs have gained much ground over me in the night. I try to focus on breathing rather than chatting, but my companion becomes talkative and jolly once released from handcuffs. He's Malaysian Chinese, and singularly curious about every island we cruise by.

'Hey, what's this one?'

How would I know? I'm a waste treatment engineer, not a geographer. I was born without much sense of direction. Why? Nobody's perfect. Not wishing to give the wrong impression of aloofness, I make wild guesses. *Uh, Cheong Chau, I think. That? uh, must be Lamma. Good seafood, but overpriced.* Makes no difference anyway. He'll never verify my geographic speculations. Lies don't get whiter than this.

Finally, Lantau. This one I know with ninety percent confidence. Before disembarking, we are handcuffed again. The one-minute walk from the pier to the waiting van is my first public appearance in prison uniform, wearing handcuffs. Two small kids playing nearby stare at us with wide eyes. I have a spontaneous urge to give them a *boo!* I look down instead, and see my shadow underfoot, getting stepped on by myself. It must be shortly past noon.

The drive to Tong Fuk takes about twenty minutes of aggressive navigation through winding country roads. Traffic's sparse, the job's boring, and the passengers are low-lifers. Who wouldn't drive like this? The scenic route brings back ridiculous memories from younger days. I had camped on the beaches of this island a few times, confused by pubescent desires, tortured by sand fleas. Life is a series of transitions, each one torturous in its own way, but none as embarrassing as puberty in retrospect. It puzzles me why some old people want to be teenagers again.

Back then, Lantau was a collection of sleepy fishing villages. It has since been nibbled at by the government and private developers to house a huge middle-class residential estate, the Airport, Disneyland, and a few bucolic correctional institutions. Only Shek Pik and Tong Fuk prisons are still in operation — Shek Pik for really tough guys; Tong Fuk for not so tough ones, like me — 365820 — and my new pal from Malaysia.

The surroundings are pleasing — tall trees, songbirds, and a quiet beach in the distant background, guarded by greyish-green mountains. But I'm fighting bacteria in defeatist mode. Nothing looks right at the moment. Plus, don't forget, I'm in jail, and Tong Fuk is no more a hotel than LCK.

The reception is assuringly friendly. The security officer who gives the now familiar search is warmly inquisitive and courteous. While I push against the wall naked, he asks behind my back what I'm in for, and whether I'm preparing an appeal.

After checking in, we go through another gate, and are left alone at a split level dining hall. The higher level is raised like a performance stage with a few tables. At the auditorium below are a dozen or so round tables. At this time of the day, the room is largely empty but for a few muscular inmates chatting and exercising on stage, wearing only boxer shorts. Malay takes the few steps up and sits down at an empty table at the other end of the stage. I follow him. Just as I put down my garbage bag of personal possessions, looking forward to a good rest at last, a *See Hing* walks over, swaying, muscles twitching.

He talks to Malay only: 'Dew Lay Lo Mo, does this look like a fucking restaurant to you?' 'Ah, Hm Ho Yi See, See Hing!' Sorry sorry, really sorry.

He springs to his feet and exits stage-right. I follow closely behind. There's nobody else down here. He picks a table near the entrance. Good strategic choice.

'So, what're you in for?' I ask after a few silent minutes to let adrenaline dissipate.

My Malaysian companion tells me stories about the other side of the credit card business which got him here. It's a long one. To my stuffy head, he talks with an echo, as if we're inside a huge garbage can. I listen with a friendly smile and hidden regret. Should have waited till I'm in a better condition to ask the intro question.

In principle, I don't approve of credit cards. I avoid using plastics with small businesses such as local eateries as much as possible. Having been a small business owner myself, I know how much work and risks it takes to run one. Not many successful shops in Hong Kong can manage a net profit of, say, five percent of turnover, after paying two arms and a leg for rent. Credit cards collect about two percent of transactions, rain or shine. That's roughly forty percent of net profit for doing nothing other than offering petty bonus points to users.

That's blatantly criminal.

Forging credit cards makes Malay half a Robin Hood. He steals from criminals but doesn't share with the poor. He's enthusiastic and proud of his work like a real pro though.

According to the pro, the best place to steal embedded info is North American gas stations. Many of these petrol outlets do not accept cash because of armed hold-ups; plastic is mandatory, especially at night. Bribing the minimum-paid cashier for an additional insertion into a reader is easy. Malay's gang has collected a huge database of these potentially stolen cards, but won't act just yet. They would hack into selected accounts and monitor spending pattern for up to six months before deciding which ones to replicate. The long lapse of time makes it difficult to trace where the card was dubbed.

Malay would make an excellent software salesman. What he wants me to understand he explains clearly. On critical technical details, he explains eloquently without giving away proprietary information. Like a typical urban professional, he's passionately knowledgeable about his specialised trade, and a sucker for brand-name products, especially when they are free. He was buying a few lavish bags too many for his wives when the wrong card got him into trouble. When arrested at the Prada boutique in Central, he had more than forty cards with his own person. He's very well travelled. Three international jailing experiences qualify him to compare the relative merits and demerits of prisons in Malaysia, France, and Hong Kong.

He has a joke to tell.

'A prison joke?' I say with a sore throat. Wish I could ask for a rain check.

'Yes. A true story lah. The most stupid fucker I've ever met in jail. Really fucking funny, I tell you.'

So, this jailmate of his in Malaysia had bought two counterfeit bank drafts for a bargain price of RM1000. When he tried to cash the smaller one, the bank teller politely asked him to please wait, Sir. So he did, patiently, tapping his briefcase which contained a bigger check, anticipating the good life ahead, planning his shopping list. When the cops arrived, they seized his bank

draft made out for One Billion pound sterling. The other one, in his briefcase, saved for later days, was ten times the value.

'I tell you lah, Ah Cheong' — most *See Hings* call me by my Chinese middle name — 'in any fucking jail, you'll find at least one super idiot.' He sounds like solicitor Derek.

'In every big corporation, you'll find at least two super fucking idiots,' I say, also speaking from experience.

Naturally, I take my first insider prison joke with a grain of salt, until chancing upon a news report years later that a man in Yunnan tries to cash a RMB1.9 billion fixed deposit coupon which he has purchased for RMB166 on the internet.

Human stupidity doesn't seem to have a reasonable limit, especially when magnified by greed.

* * *

TWO

Pond of Felicity

Tong Fuk, a beautiful village on Lantau Island where my penal institution is, means 'Pond of Felicity'

Death Orientation

Lantau is about twice the size of Hong Kong Island. Its 147 square kilometres of landmass was home to farmers and fishermen in sporadic villages, largely forgotten and left alone, until catching the attention of developers in the late 1970s, and subsequently the airport authority and Disney.

Tong Fuk village at the south side, removed from the airport and Mickey Mouse, remains relatively tranquil in today's term. Above the Tong Fuk Temple Beach, tucked away at the end of Ma Po Ping Road, beyond a stream which once irrigated fertile fields, is the Tong Fuk Correctional Institution — my jail.

Strategically located along the hillside, the prison compound comprises two main clusters. Black hands and non-Chinese ONs are incarcerated at Upper Circle near the Admin, aka Fingerprint Room, and the main entrance. Downhill from Upper Circle, towards the beach, is Lower Circle where mostly white hands and felons nearing the end of a long sentence are kept.

After dinner, Malay and I shower at Upper Circle. The shower hall is much nicer than the one at LCK — less chaotic, and not flooded. After shower, we are told to go to a transition dorm for new arrivals at Lower Circle, unaccompanied.

Connecting the two Circles is a long flight of stairs hemmed in by multiple layers of tall chickenwire fences. They don't look impossible to scale, but it would take great courage and immense stupidity to do so, for on the other side of Fence One is Fence Two, similarly deterring. Anyone pigheaded enough to overcome the second fence, probably bleeding profusely from barbwire cuts by then, will land in another section of the prison compound, dripping more blood, still very much in jail, not knowing which way to turn for freedom.

Malay notices me pausing to examine the arrangement briefly, and volunteers his expert estimate that at least one idiot per year would make the attempt, diplomatically discouraging me from being the *Idiot of the Year*. No, that isn't my intention at all, merely taking note of the security architecture out of engineering curiosity.

Looking towards the bottom end, the world is pitch dark but for the illuminated staircase stretching out deep into the bowels of Felicity Pond, and the faint flickers of will-o'-the-wisps.

The night is cold for Hong Kong, fifteen or so, crisp and balmy. The government might have issued some kind of 'cold weather warnings' by now to warn its fragile citizenry that environmental threats have exceeded survival range. These days, 18 is too cold, 25 is too hot, to reflect society's prosperity status.

A couple of guards stationed midway are enjoying the evening air. They hardly look at us.

After incubating for God knows how long in my dark and slimy interior, the bugs are ready to raid, looting energy and resources, raping my cells for their own proliferation. Go ahead. I'm down, falling, sinking, defenceless, defeated. Their moment has arrived.

Plodding down the stairs, a thin plastic bag with all my personal belongings slung over shoulder, weighed down by heavy slippers, the interminable descent feels ominously one-way. Malay mumbles something which I can't make out, but don't care. He's probably asking the Latin name of some tree. I answer *huh?* and walk on.

Is this a flu? depression? complication of both? a portent of things to come? I've been idiotically trying to stay *positive*. How much unimaginably bad luck would it take to convince me that life has gone into a tailspin, free-falling, whistling through foul air?

The nose is clogged. I open my mouth to breathe. The air tastes like rotten fish in the throat. Or is it the taste of my tongue?

The last few steps extend laterally, turning the bottom concourse into an amphitheatre stage. A duty guard mutely points to one of the baby blue and white bungalows a few more steps down, at the far end of the stage. That would be as low as things go for now.

Thank you, Sir.

There are two dormitories on the ground floor. The gate to one is open. The choice is obvious.

It's a big room with dozens of bunkbeds, mostly empty. Two *See Hings* are preparing their beds. We exchange silent, uninterested, glances. On a table are a few piles of beddings, and a white jerrycan. Malay grabs some blankets and settles in one of the beds without saying goodnight. I unscrew the cap of the container and sniff with stuffed nose. Nothing, not even the familiar industrial smell of cheap plastic. It has to be water. Don't feel like asking more stupid questions. So what if it isn't? I drink two big mugs, grab a stack of blankets, and lie down.

Clank, the gate is locked.

I'm shivering. Someone's snoring gently nearby.

I pull the blankets up over the chin. They don't do much.

Am I sleeping? Or suffering from an insomniac delirium? The bones feel as if I have been lying down motionless for days.

It's the seventh of March. I've been a prisoner for seven days. This is also Leslie's First Seven-Day Period, a major afterlife milestone, her last day to hang around the human world as a shadowy entity. Departure rites distract us from the pain of loss; readymade stories connect gnawing memories with the great unknown, projecting continuity. The seventh-day rite resurrects loved ones for a final farewell, and a feast of their favourite earthly food, so they can *Guo Gai* with a full phantom stomach. But the living must hide, like children do from Santa Claus. If the homecoming spirit catches sight of a loved one, it might get all sentimental, upsetting a peaceful departure, turning itself into a ghost, becoming a lingering problem.

Leslie is expected to make her final home visit tonight, maybe right this moment. Will my brother Chris set out her favourite dishes before midnight, then hide and listen for poltergeist

consumption? He hasn't cooked for years, though. It may not be edible even with paranormal tolerance.

Has it been minutes, hours, since what? Is it the middle of the night, or near dawn?

My throat burns. Let it burn. Don't feel like getting up for water. The dying don't get up for water. It's a matter of principle.

I'm parched, probably dead already, buried in a desert, dehydrated, desiccated.

Can't say the feeling of truly dying is *good* or *bad*. So far so calm. No anxiety. Years of practice have not been in vain.

The living have never experienced death, hence the deep, irrational, futile fear. Death is a taboo in many cultures. Mentioning it is for some unreasonable reason depressing, grey, pessimistic, as if optimism can defeat mortality. Mature and polite participants of humanity's collective denial don't discuss toilet matters or death in public. Turd and death don't exist in civilised circles. Paradoxically, describing constipation — the tormenting absence of excrement — at the dining table is also regarded unsocial.

I'm not a very mature and polite member of the human community. To me, the treatment of faecal matters is my professional duty — a way of making a living. And refusing to face and prepare for death makes it unnecessarily scary as we age. Fearing death also distracts us from life. If life were a scenic train ride, passengers who absolutely abhor the absolutely unavoidable destination will not be able to fully enjoy the scenery along the way.

The Buddha told us death contemplation is a shortcut to enlightenment. Soon after him, Plato pointed out the proper practice of philosophy is 'about nothing else but dying and being dead.' Roman generals were supposedly accompanied by a slave mumbling *memento mori* — remember that you will die — in victory processions. True story or not, it's a good idea. Though if true, many a slave must have had his tongue cut off by irritated soldiers. Perhaps *Lao Zhi's* suggestion is more feasible: triumphant troops should parade in funeral costumes as a reminder that military victory is the result of many tragic deaths — not something to be celebrated.

Long before I learned of the sobering morbidity of ancient sages, I had started to rehearse death in order to de-stress. When life gets stressful — and it often does without warning — I lie in my simulated deathbed to savour the last minutes, reflecting on an ephemeral existence.

I've done a lot to justify a lifetime, haven't I? Can't name a single thing which was unquestionably worth doing though. In the end, all much ado about nothing, holographic fillers of a delusive incarnation.

Just an empty dream.

No big deal. So, relax.

I highly recommend this *deathbed de-stressing technique*. But some benighted friends regard it an early symptom of mental derangement. My family gives me the impression that they understand, and is supportive as always.

Embracing death with an open mind and open heart is not only therapeutic, but also enlightening, seriously beneficial.

The one and only certainty ahead is death. Does it not make sense to start the spade work early, and give it some attention? Denying eventuality doesn't prevent it from coming. Weekly medical check-ups would probably bring death forward, or make life not worth living. Denial only builds anxiety as time accelerates with age, hurling us closer to the big unknown, making the remaining days progressively more terrifying. Furthermore, humans are possibly the only animal which can actively and deliberately contemplate death. It's a unique privilege in the Animal Kingdom.

A healthy acceptance of the End also gives life a timeline, putting it into perspective, making it at once precious and insignificant.

We grade life all the time with utmost insincerity. We ask each other *how's life* and reply *good*, *okay*, *terrible*, *et cetera*. If an entire lifetime should be properly graded accordingly, what would the criteria be? What kind of life would be *good*, *okay*, *or terrible*? It differs from person to person, naturally, but not many have given *any* thought on how they may grade their own life, even if they believe it's the only one they'll ever have. That seems strangely negligent.

If life were an exam, our scores would reflect how 'successfully' we've lived.

To score well in any exam, we must first of all understand what the questions are. In the case of a lifetime, it's what we want out of it. Then we must be aware of how much time is given (on average), and how much of it has elapsed, in order to pace ourselves sensibly. Spending all our time and energy on one or two items, ignoring the rest of the exam paper, losing sight of the big picture, forgetting to note how much time's left, would result in a lousy grade, if not miserable failure.

Death drills remind me where I am on the timeline. They give me a sense of proportion, help me visualise life in its entirety, putting my existence into perspective.

The deathbed also makes me honest. Only a few minutes left, how am I going to deal with the long list of regrets, unfulfilled dreams, and outstanding rivalries with annoying people I passionately want to prove wrong? I can't. All the ambitions and competitions are not worth mentioning, not when there's only a few minutes to spend anyway. Remorses seem different though... Why did I say that nasty thing the other day... Well, too late, alas.

But wait! It's not too late! This is only a rehearsal!

The chance of me still being alive tomorrow is rather high. Why not rectify? Forget about the dreams and vengeances, they won't matter when the end comes. But nagging regrets can be minimised and reconciled while I can.

See? That's how I became a great guy through death rehearsals.

Another of my favourite delirium pastimes is visualising my imminent return to the big picture.

With due self-respect, I'm infinitely less than one grain of sand among all the deserts and beaches on Earth, Moon, Mars and Venus. Utterly negligible, really, indescribably, but very

precious to myself. Seeing my cosmic insignificance gives me a relaxed focus on this infinitesimal life the best I can, with positive nonchalance.

Before retirement, I often rehearsed death on uneventful Sunday evenings, knowing that dreadful Monday awaits if I survive tonight. Depending on my mood, a death drill could be sobering, calming, philosophical, spiritual, or outright silly. Right now, lying at the lower bunk of a prison bed, wrapped in prickly blankets, sick like a dog, it's dead serious. The slammer is a powerful setting.

Without any timepiece, the minutes tick away with oppressive urgency.

Let's go through the regrets list — things I could have done differently, people I should have treated differently. Too late, not much I can do now.

I'm shivering, sweating. Skeleton frozen, teeth clattering. This is the big transition for real, not just another practice run. Let bygones be bygones.

Where will I *Guo Gai* to this time, when my bodily molecules cease to cooperate with each other in a biochemically coordinated manner? Nothing in the universe is ever totally, thoroughly, ultimately, extinguished. Annihilation stinks of human exceptionalism, more incredible than even Heaven and Hell.

I'll find out soon, once the last breath leaves me.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

The average life comprises seven hundred million breaths. Every one deserves awareness. How many left?

Faces hover above. Satu, the girls, a few friends. Farewell.

I'm more impatient than sad. Let's get this over with.

Being ready isn't the same as 'not wishing to live'. I want to live on, to survive this fateful tribulation. I even feel a peculiar sense of purpose. *This must be happening for a reason*. Perhaps I'll make something out of it one day? What could that be? No idea. Can't even imagine. Real reasons are often beyond imagination.

Drop everything right here, right now.

Fine...fine. Let's go.

Then I die.

I wake in the morning with a lungful of phlegm. Death hasn't happened. I slept well after the lonely drama. My cellmates are still sleeping.

A patrolling guard looks in through the gate.

'Ah Sir!' As loud as my throat can manage. 'Can I get a temperature check?'

'Wait for the medical officer during his morning round,' he says, then leaves.

Sure. Nothing urgent. Just dying. He probably suspects that all illnesses are feigned. No point insisting. Dying right now would be a satisfying vindication.

Climbing back to the Upper Circle.

'You okay?' Malay asks.

Why? Do I look horrible?

'Oh yeah, just a flu,' I reply with a weak smile. Globally, only a few hundred thousand die from the flu every year. Just a flu.

The morning is much longer than usual. When life is unpleasant, time passes slowly, effectively promoting longevity. Malay mercifully suppresses his prattles into mumbling monologues, leaving me out of it.

Finally, a yellowish lab coat appears.

I wish I have a spontaneous combustion to show, accompanied by high fever, vomiting, seizure, diarrhoea, all that.

'Ah Sir, I think I have a fever.'

He puts his palm on my forehead for half a second, and gives his diagnosis: 'You're okay.' My Mum used to do that, and was right every time. I hope he's equally good.

I feel better after a few rounds of Panadol and a tiny yellow pill — a Tong Fuk panacea. I don't think it's antibiotic. Maybe some kind of anti-inflammatory pain killer? It works. It reputedly works for everything. If an inmate had liver cancer, the medics would probably give him the same pill, perhaps double dosage for such a serious malady. When options are limited, the body smartens up and reacts more sensibly to medication. The yellow gunk from LCK worked magic as well. The father of all boils calmed down the next morning and shrivelled away within a couple of days, leaving behind a flaky greyish scar, and me wondering which biochemical pathway had the pus taken to vanish.

In the next two days, I sit around Upper Circle *Fan Tong*, struggling with a heavy head and Malay's enthusiasm. Imprisonment evidently doesn't bother him. Whenever he takes a break from telling stories, I make notes or write about my own unfolding tragedy.

Our only chore is to help sweep the floor after each meal. For a disciplinary institution, the dining hall is wildly unrestrained, even more chaotic than LCK. Chicken bones (not that there's a lot), orange peels, cigarette butts, tissues, delinquent mucous all get tossed over the shoulders or released straight from the mouth by gravity. Cleaning up looks daunting at first. But with a team of more than twenty, it takes only a few minutes. When the place is clean again, we sit and wait for the next meal.

In the dining hall is a notice board which nobody notices. I may be the only one who has ever read the bulletins carefully.

There's an essay competition organised by the Rainbow Newsletter. Rainbow, that brilliant illusion across the sky after rain, ephemeral symbol of groundless hope. Why not? It'd teach the ego a lesson if I lost to a bunch of primary school dropouts in a literary contest. In all likelihood, mine will be the sole submission and win by default. I might then be invited by the Commissioner of Correctional Services to tour Hong Kong's prisons and give talks to fellow

inmates. Let me prepare one in English and one in Chinese to impress the hell out of a bunch of sleepy social workers and volunteers.

The theme is 'Best Hope in Future' in English. Not grammatically perfect, but the intention is clear. A title comes to mind: *Now* is the best hope for tomorrow. Be encouraging and positive, absolutely no sarcasm, I remind myself, then proceed to jot down a few discussion points while Malay yanks hair from his nose absentmindedly, deep in thought.

My slow train of thought is derailed by Derek's visit.

We're in a small room with CCTV. A guard peeks through a spy window on the door once in a while, marking his dutiful presence with greasy nose prints.

'Things are looking good according to counsels,' he says as a matter of fact, radiating optimism. 'We'll launch the appeal as soon as possible.'

Wonderful.

Derek's a mood buffer. When things look great, he'll tell horror stories to suppress expectation. 'Don't judge this with common sense' is his favourite advice. 'Judges don't think that way.' Annoyingly, he's been right most of the time. On the other hand, when we appear to have fallen into a cesspool of law points, he would be blasé. 'Nah, only a show. All bullshit. I wouldn't worry about it.'

'Don't worry, we'll get you out of here in a few weeks,' he says, unequivocally confident. 'We have an extremely strong case. The judge has erred in numerous areas.'

'Is the Court of Appeal, uh, more rational?' I ask, knowing that I won't rely on his answer, whatever it may be.

'Well,' he pauses. 'They're supposed to be.'

'Are they?' I press on.

'Don't forget there's still the Court of Final Appeal,' he says with forward-looking buoyancy.

Yes, he *has* included us in his five-year budget plan, ninety-nine percent sure.

Shortly before dinner, Malay and I are summoned to a small room for orientation. The tutor is a casual and friendly old screw. He goes over the house rules: No drugs; no gambling; no fighting; thou shalt not steal, or kill.

'Understood?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Good. Now, blanket folding,' he solemnly announces. 'This is very important.'

Can't imagine anything more important.

He spends a disproportionate amount of time showing us how to fold blankets into a taut cube. 'Absolutely no loose ends. Just like in the army. Every morning.'

I've never been in the army, but note his emphasis on the blanket culture. Every institution has its tics. Evidently, it's blanket folding at Tong Fuk.

This is Day Three. I get a job.

'Report to Workshop Five at Lower Circle,' an officer tells me after lunch.

'Yes, Ah Sir.'

I no longer ask stupid questions such as *right now?* Or *where exactly is Workshop Five down-under?* The answers will come. They always do. In a way, prison smooths the vicissitudes of life. The stress of decision making has been largely eliminated, courtesy of the Correction Services Department. It's up to me to appreciate the liberation.

Chat with Malay briefly to say goodbye. Being a black hand, he'll stay up here. I promise to ask my wife to bring him a prepaid phone card so he could call his wives back home. Without a long-distant phone card, foreign inmates have no means of informing their families that they won't be home for dinner for many moons to come. Malay has three wives to call. That could be why he seems so happy here. Prison must feel to him a much needed break from domestic lives. Unfortunately, my wife will find out that articles from unrelated visitors are not permitted.

Resourceful as ever, he has ingratiated himself with God-brother who kicked us off stage when we arrived. He has even found himself a vocation as barber, claiming past experience as a salon owner in Kuala Lumpur, charging the standard rate of two fags per hairdo. The official hairdresser is a lucrative post which obviously requires God-brother's blessing. The amazing thing is I have been with him nearly all the time, and not noticed any social manoeuvring.

I've become accustomed, even attached, to Malay's garrulous presence. He can be tiring, but is my only acquaintance in this alien situation. Well, life is made up of changes — mostly inevitable, nonnegotiable changes. Things happen. Shit happens. People come. People go.

So, here I go.

At the top of the stairs, all alone this time, I pause to take in the dreadful spring day.

The sky is faraway, translucent with tainted moisture. The crispness of winter is starting to turn soggy and lukewarm. The feeble sun, filtered by haze, barely visible, has an unwholesome effect on the air, making it muggy one minute, chilly the next.

High security slammers are surrounded by walls. Tong Fuk, being low security, is surrounded by chickenwire fences, cutting the outside world into little puzzle squares. The distant sea laps mutely against a presumably deserted beach. Behind it is a barricade of rolling hills. What a picturesque desolation.

Weighted down by my bag of chattels, retarded by reluctant footwear, my brisk urban pace has slowed to that of a prisoner's. There's no hurry. I take my time to descend to Lower Circle. A guard at the bottom concourse waves me in the direction of Workshop Five from a distance. See? I knew the answer would come in the fullness of time. I salute him and drag myself to my post-retirement new job.

* * *

Lower Circle



Some of my valuable belongings

Along both sides of the steps linking the two Circles at Tong Fuk were similar looking bungalows housing various workshops, dining halls, sleeping quarters, a laundromat, and an infirmary. Painted white and baby blue, they looked incongruously innocent, uniformly unimaginative, suggesting a template design traced by gin-tonic drinking government architects in white linen suits from a previous age.

The last few steps of the stairway extended laterally into semi-circles, forming an amphitheatre with the bottom concourse. At the far side of the amphitheatre was a narrow footpath. Turning left on it, barely a minute's walk away, was a hard surface football pitch visually open to the unreachable beach. To the right of the concourse was Workshop Five. Next to it was the *Fan Tong* Common Room. In triangulation with Workshop Five and the Common Room, about twenty phlegmatic steps away, was my dorm. Shaded by giant banyan trees, skirted by wild flowers, this secluded enclosure could have been a sub-tropical retreat if not for the omnipresent fences. Together with the football field, they formed the confines within which I ate, slept, worked, and exercised.

Workshop Five was my entrance to the Lower Circle community.

As I approached, an officer perched on a grey wooden stool laid down his newspaper. He studied me briefly, and pulled a registry from under the lectern.

'Gong Si?' Company?

Once again, I stalled.

My business associations were not secret. But revealing it to a stranger under the situation did not seem appropriate. Didn't need the Guardian Angel to tell me that.

Hesitation was once again an adequate answer.

'No?' He entered my name in the column for inmates without Triad affiliation. The Car Thief had not taught me that one at LCK.

Gong Si means company, a commercial entity. I learnt much later on that the term originally referred to 'Triad organisation' in the Qing Dynasty. Triads were underground revolutionaries, not free traders, dangerous criminals in the opinion of Emperor and invaders alike.

Inmates with company affiliation were grouped under three conglomerates: *Number*, *Wo Kee*, and *Lo-Chiu/Sun Yee On*. Not exactly fearsome brandnames for mobsters, especially *Number*, which sounds like a Bingo Club for veterans with hearing aids.

In my secondary school days, when gangsters were 'teddy boys' with self-inflicted greasy hair, *Number* was called 14K. At some point in late 20th century, the number *four* suddenly and inexplicably became a taboo because it rhymed, as it had for millennia, with death. And fourteen, *Sud Say*, is *sure death* in Cantonese. Very inauspicious, especially to a gangster. Thereafter, *four* gradually disappeared from buildings (which were already missing the thirteenth floor due to a British aversion), seats, price tags, lockers, anything numero, to dodge death. A thirty-storey building in Hong Kong is physically only twenty-six tall after taking four, thirteen, fourteen, and twenty-four out of existence. 14K was rebranded to Number to retain the historically numeric image, but without the unlucky fourteen. A silly brandname for a gang of outlaws for sure, but silliness is preferable to sure death.

Hong Kong was a diverse community with many assemblies of underground thugs. These miscellaneous delinquent congregations were summarily lumped under only three banners in Tong Fuk to streamline identification and management. I wonder where Joe, the start-up gangster at LCK, founder of a new *company*, was assigned to.

The populist method used by ancient tribes to pick chieftains had been adopted by imprisoned gangsters, and worked reasonably well. Heads of the three *holding companies* were democratically endorsed by their respective memberships — one thug, one vote. The chosen leaders were automatically elevated to the ruling class, and became foremen and checkers at the workshops, getting paid at the top end of the scale, exempted from manual labour.

A minority of unaffiliated inmates — like myself — were the pariahs.

I, a harmless old man, new and dumb, no affiliation since retirement, walked into Workshop Five with due meekness.

A quick glance around the room, head slightly lowered. Didn't detect any vicious looking face.

A gang-boss greeted me: 'Ah Cheong? Call me Ah Gou (O Dog)'

'Gou Gor,' Big Brother Dog looked to be in his twenties.

'Follow me.'

At the back of the room was a matrix of cubbyholes approximately 30 by 30 by 30cm deep. A see-through plastic door, translucent from age, dangled from its last hinge. It befitted my lowly status perfectly, no complaints.

'Thank you, Gou Gor.'

I offloaded my shampoo, liquid soap and two notebooks to the un-lockable locker. Had been hauling them around with my pens, tissues, mug, spoon, toothbrush, soap, electric razor, batteries, bug repellent. The thin plastic bag had been stretched thin at various points by the sharp corners of these objects.

A young man in front of the cubby holes noticed the pathetic state of my luggage: 'Ah Suk — uncle — your bag's gonna break soon.'

'I know.' Smiling, embarrassed by my shabby state of existence in a respectable institution.

He reached under his sewing machine and took out a conforming, B4 size translucent plastic portfolio, something which I planned to purchase with prison salary one day. But this was only my first day of work. Payday would be at least a month away.

'Here, take this!'

'I don't have anything to pay you yet,' I said, caressing the beautiful clutch bag made of cheap plastic, smelling like gum boots after a nice walk in the gutter. I didn't have a single cigarette or biscuit, the global currency of the realm.

'Don't worry.'

'You sure?' I accepted it with eternal gratitude, pinching and twisting the Guardian Angel's lips at the same time before it whispered anything infuriating. The snobbish ecclesiastical eunuch didn't understand friendliness and generosity from the fringes of the human world.

'I'm Ah Cheong. Will pay you back when I get paid.'

'Call me Ah Kin.'

No handshake.

Just like that, I looked semi-respectable ahead of schedule, and made a new friend. I folded the old plastic bag carefully and put it in my locker.

A well-mannered young man came over and introduced himself as Xiu Long — Little Dragon — addressing me Uncle Cheong. He was one of the gang foremen. Moderate in stature, he was well-built and handsome with a hint of mixed blood. He told me to sit at a table near the entrance. I took the opportunity to enquire about the toilet paper situation. He said one roll per person was rationed every three weeks.

'But if you really need more, just let me know.'

That was the most reassuring thing I'd heard since February 29th, an eon ago.

Until someone newer joined the workshop, I would be responsible for floor sweeping and toilet cleaning two times a day. Would have been required to carry drinking water to the workshop every morning as well had I not been classified '3G' — a category exempted from lifting heavy objects due to old age.

The janitorial task was kind of reassuring. I instinctively felt safer in a humble position. In my old-fashioned mind, nobody with half a heart would bully an old toilet cleaner, and a dedicated one at that. I scrubbed the disgusting bowls with patience and respect, and removed

stubborn stains on the wall as if they had great archeological value. My toilet duty lasted only a few days. A newcomer took over with a sour face.

I had imagined prison work to be harsh and brutal. Pause to scratch, and the whip lands with a shattering crack.

I was wrong. Prison labour at Tong Fuk wasn't any different from most menial jobs — just something which had to be done because, like it or not, it had to be done. Comparing with regular jobs, it was actually less stressful. Performance had no bearing on job security or livelihood. There would always be food on the table, courtesy of the tax paying masses. None of us cared about promotion, and layoff was mere wishful thinking. Without any pressure to maximise profit, productivity, or personal bonus, the supervisors were also relatively stable, mentally speaking, than their industrial counterparts.

Unexpectedly, in the total absence of conventional incentives, there were quite a few conscientious workers, more than enough to prove academics in management theories wrong. Perhaps productive instincts laboriously selected over millennia still lurked in the gene pool? Perhaps these diligent workers, like me, understood that occupation speeds time up, and is therefore an effective mitigation? Naturally, not all my colleagues at Workshop Five shared this insight. Many were stubbornly remiss as a matter of principle.

What I found most impressive was that the workers and slackers at Workshop Five coexisted in remarkable harmony. In a corporate environment, respectable colleagues find each other useless, or lazy, or dumb, or all of the above. And most of them are right. At Workshop Five, we didn't judge each other by work ethics. Industriousness was a personal choice. Some enjoyed working rather than staring at nothing. Others preferred nose picking over sewing. To each his own. No one gave a damn. The workplace atmosphere was the most liberal and open I had ever experienced.

Surprisingly, the two technical officers in-charge were similarly accommodating.

Officer A was extremely helpful. He was always fixing or fine tuning or oiling sewing machines, tutoring anyone interested in learning the trade. His partnering colleague was the opposite. Glued to his chair, he preferred to risk thrombosis than waste energy shifting his bum. He read and reread the tabloids during his shift, announcing loudly which movie star was screwing who every now and then. When an inmate asked for help because a sewing needle had broken, he'd tell him to 'fuck off' or 'use your stupid fucking head'. Amazingly, his criminal negligence and preposterous indolence didn't appear to bother his conscientious colleague whom I suspected to be an undercover saint.

Twice daily, Tong Fuk's top dog did his ceremonial rounds with an entourage.

Their movement would be expertly tracked and communicated between all the workshops by phone. By the time they arrived at our workshop, they would not be able to find a filament of lint on the floor even if they went down on all fours to look. If I were the warden, I would have found that suspicious. I once mentioned this to a friendly guard, suggesting that the authenticity

of the setting could be improved. He was baffled. 'You're saying we should keep the place dirty to look *real*, and invite shit from the warden? *Dew Lay Lo Mo!*' Fantasies take precedence over reality even in a prison.

Upon arrival of the warden, the duty officer would holler: 'Warden inspecting. Raise your hand if you have requests or complaints.'

We would spring to our feet and holler 'Morning Sir,' if it was the morning; 'Afternoon Sir,' if it was the afternoon. These greetings were quaintly offered in English. Even Uncle Tseng, a jolly senior Triad in his sixties, the only person I'd met since kindergarten who didn't know the English alphabets, could say these two foreign phrases perfectly with a *Chaozhou* accent. During my tenure at Tong Fuk, I had not witnessed anyone venturing constructive criticism or complaints as invited.

It would be tempting to sneer at these daily charades. But inspection rounds were made two times everyday, including weekends and holidays, rain or shine. Ninety nine point nine nine per cent of them were uneventful. It would be unrealistic to demand exactitude or stirring enthusiasm. Nonetheless, these predictable visits were a meaningful psychological deterrent to potential abuse. I was happy about their assuring reruns anyway.

Privatised prisons in some countries use captive labour for commercial contracts. Hong Kong convicts only work on internal projects, strictly non-profitable.

Workshop Five was a garment factory, manufacturing prison uniforms. My first assignment was to clip loose threads from nearly finished garments with a pair of truncated scissors. Annoyingly, with the pointy ends removed, the castrated blades were too blunt and wide for trimming itchy nose hair.

I started at the bottom of the pay scale. Within two weeks, I was promoted to the sewing machine. Perhaps my toilet cleaning had impressed the supervisors? I had never operated a sewing machine before, but liked it right away. I promptly became faster and better at it. A young Triad who sewed at Formula One speed noticed my progress and taught me a few useful tricks. Very soon, I was hemming over a hundred pairs of trousers an hour without compromising the details, or making one leg longer than the other. I was quite proud of this late-life achievement.

As the production line comprised workers and slackers, output was limited by the laziest guy in the room. Diligent labourers like myself could finish their daily quota in an hour or two, then chatted, read, wrote, or took long showers with a clean conscience. Reading was a more common sight in Tong Fuk than on university campuses.

I was gathering a cloud of loose threads with blunt scissors when my number was called: '365820. Grave sweeping!'

It choked me up instantly. Finally! A week had passed since the last visit at LCK.

I sprinted up the two hundred odd steps to Fingerprint Room, forgetting that I was a 3G inmate with creaking knees. Slippers snapped at my heels like man-eating ducks.

There was a long table with a glass partition in the middle. A few groups of inmates were whispering to visitors through phones. Satu and Fai sat on the other side, waving at me. Lantau was remote by Hong Kong standards. Handicapped by language barrier, it would have been difficult for Satu to visit without the help of my best pal and business partner. They say you only find out who your true friends are when in trouble. But I always knew who they were.

The phones were not multi-channel like the ones at LCK. We couldn't have a three-way conversation. Through the thick glass, I saw her badly mangled thumb nails. She had this infuriating habit of scratching them to the bone when stressed, or bored, or concentrating, or daydreaming. We cried and laughed a little, adjusting to seeing but not touching each other as best we could.

I had been on an alternate-day mood swing. One day I'd be calm and accepting, deriving job satisfaction from snipping threads, whistling as I scrubbed toilet bowls. Quite predictably, I'd be agitated the next day, coming apart inside while contriving a placid face. I would feel depressed, dangerously close to losing it. Another twenty six months would seem infinitely longer than eternity. Thankfully, being aware of this cyclic pattern helped me get through the bad days. Knowing that tomorrow would be better, I would go to bed early and look forward to a positive sunrise.

Today, unfortunately, was low tide. Even the visit couldn't change that.

After spending the last vestige of positive energy, I deflated as I watched Satu and Fai leave the room. I wanted to smash something, or strangle someone, and decided that I will.

So fucking what! I'm in jail already!

At this fragile moment, a guard tapped me on the shoulder: 'Time to go!'

Fuck off, arsehole!

I spun around, grinned ominously, and said: 'Okay, Ah Sir. Thank you.'

About seventy inmates from Workshop Five were housed in three separate dorms, each with a capacity of twenty-eight. I was in Dorm L1.

We were rotated periodically between dorms for security reasons. Once in a while, sickness or misbehaviour would send a *See Hing* to the infirmary or the *Water Rice Cell*, aka The Hole in American prison parlance, for solitary confinement. In darker olden days, only plain water and white rice were served in Water Rice Cells three times daily — breakfast, lunch, dinner — hence the name. After a stint of watery detoxing, the transgressor would be transferred to a new unit, lest old animosities flare up on his return. Anyone sent to the hole was therefore gone for good as far as a workshop unit was concerned. A mainlander with an infamously short fuse and the character *ren* — restraint — tattooed to his right wrist had supposedly fought through all the units at Tong Fuk. Tattooing reminders to one's body evidently doesn't work. He eventually made it back to Workshop Five to commence his second tour. He was my dorm-mate at L1. I found him nice and friendly. Well, he didn't like being teased or bullied. Who does?

The entrance to the dormitory was a metal gate with double locks. A grilled opening adjacent the main gate facilitated panoramic inspection from the outside. The keys were supposedly kept

separately by the duty guards and their colleagues from the previous shift. What would happen in case of fire, I wondered. The duty screws would need to run somewhere in a panic to retrieve the second key. I hoped it wasn't too far away. Fortunately, there wasn't much to burn, just cigarette butts, beddings, and us low-lifers.

The washroom was on display near the entrance, right next to the inspection grilles. It had two squat toilets. The one closer to the two headless showers had the usual open design. The second one, next to the wall, was exceptionally private. It was screened off by two-metre tall panels fitted with a flimsy door. On my first day, I spent more time in this private cubicle than I needed to. It felt great to squat inside it by myself, away from the eyes of jail guards and convicts. A *See Hing* promptly noticed. 'Shit there,' he said, pointing to the next one. I asked no question and obliged. I soon learnt that the private cubicle was the 'nightclub', not meant for defecation or contemplation. More on that later.

Facing the nightclub entrance were two sinks not connected to drain pipes. Water drained directly onto the floor before finding its way out of jail.

Social code at the dormitory was quite different from the outside world.

Littering was perfectly acceptable, no need to apologise. Junk food packages, half eaten buns, lit cigarette butts, phlegm globs half wrapped in tissues could all be tossed over the shoulders as casually as fishermen spit overboard. Each morning, a designated *See Hing* would clean up for three cigarettes per roommate per month. Cigarette was the currency for small conveniences and services. The guards turned a blind eye to this uncontrollable and innocuous underground economy unless it got overheated, creating a dangerous bubble like the real estate market outside.

Each night, two of the three rows of neon lights on the high ceiling would be turned off at about nine. If the kids were in a party mood, and they frequently were, their drinking game of room temperature water in lieu of alcohol, would continue. I adjusted to their rambunctious water carouse within a few days, and would fall asleep promptly with a small towel over my eyes, eardrums trembling. What gave me a bit of problem in the beginning was the hard bed, not the noise or the light.

Tong Fuk etiquettes were no more rational than country club rules. While partying could go on till late, toilet flushing was prohibited after the lights dimmed and before morning siren. Flushing was too noisy, partying wasn't.

More than twenty prisoners snoring in the same room could be clamorous, even threatening. I had done time in boarding schools in my younger days, and slept in big communal halls, but never heard snoring remotely as deafening. Extraordinary snorers were annoying but generally tolerated. Everyone snored after all. Very occasionally, they may get a rude shove in the depth of a vibrating slumber, or a loud *Dew Lay Lo Mo* scream from someone who had finally lost it, waking up half the room as a result, generating minor aftershocks of *Dew Lay Lo Mo* mumblings. The noises escaping from the inmates' dreams were often creepy. As dawn approached, someone would shatter the morning calm with eery moans or chilling shrieks as early birds exchanged pleasantries outside. The room would continue to sleep, or listen. Nobody ever complained about these shrieks. We all needed to vent bad vibes. I don't know if I ever

screamed in my Tong Fuk dreams. Probably not. One needs to have experienced being pursued by competitors brandishing meat cleavers to scream like that.

Tonight, I wanted to write about Satu's first visit. Nothing came to mind. I was on my second notebook already. The first volume had been filled with catch-up observations and reflections. Since Lower Circle, I'd been keeping a journal instead, with briefer daily entries. I had managed more distance between my observations and personal experience as a prisoner.

I entered 'goodnight, myself' in the diary, then closed it. A bit melodramatic, but I was at the end of a very bad day.

I covered my eyes with the tiny washcloth. Since the first sleepless night at LCK, I had been sleeping surprisingly well. There was a saying among the cons: 'Eating and sleeping well reduces the sentence by a third.' Well, what if one dreams of solitary confinement in the *Water Rice Hole* night after night, or getting chased down the street by the police, or facing a chopper wielding competitor? To most cons, these dreams are more likely than sweet peaceful ones, which are probably a myth. All my dreams are boring or frustrating, such as rushing to the airport and find the passport missing, or looking desperately for a toilet but every one I find is fully occupied by angry constipated people. In that event, sleeping well could even lengthen the sentence, or make imprisonment more unpleasant.

Young thugs were having yet another reunion tonight, repeating stories from their glorious teenage years at Tsim Sha Tsui at full volume. The guards were *much* more tolerant than boarding school prefects. Perhaps they preferred a lively dorm than a quiet sleepy one when they themselves had to patrol in semi-darkness.

Blearily, I heard familiar stories echoing back and forth, back and forth.

Most of my roommates didn't know each other before Tong Fuk, but they all had the same story, the only one in their universe: What's-his-fucking-face called my fucking mobile, so me and fucking Fat Chicken and Ah fucking Chu went down to the fucking disco. Fat fucking Chicken was so fucking funny, I tell you man. Oh fuck, oh dear fuck. He asked the fucking guy who the fuck he fucking thought he fucking was. Oh it was so fucking funny! Oh fuck me man! We fucking chased him all the fucking way down fucking Prat Avenue...'

Ah, there's a second one, much shorter: 'Fuck me! You fucking know her too! Oh fucking Suzie. What a fucking pussy. I miss her fucking mouth. Oh what a small fucking world...'

Is it them? Is it the small fucking world? Or is it me?

I didn't have an answer. Still don't. I'm just a trespassing alien on this planet, confused.

Lulled by the happy sounds of social intercourse, I grinned behind my washcloth. Yeah, I landed at the bottom of the pit again. But tomorrow will be better, I knew from statistics.

Sweet dreams? Let's try.

'I fucking walked over, and smashed a fucking bottle over his fucking head...'

* * *

Black Bean and Tiger



With this portfolio, I no longer need to lug a garbage bag along all day

Urban household cats are prisoners serving life sentences.

All day long, all life long, apartment cats stalk their own shadows cast by indoor lights. Most will never get the chance to confront a real mouse. The only nocturnal fun is to curl up against stinky human feet, purring for favour. Cats of my childhood got to enjoy a rich variety of leftovers and fishbones. Nowadays, their descendants eat exactly the same measured portions of desiccated tablets with an artificial hint of one or two industrial flavours, for as long as they live.

Dogs, too dumb for toilet-training, get to take daily pee-breaks outdoors at public lamp posts. Human jailbirds, unfit for society, get to chase balls in a playground for an hour most days. But cats, smart and cute and all that, have to do their business indoors in a plastic box, then kick the turds out vigorously with a cloud of litter to vent frustration. No wonder many house cats appear emotionally unstable, dashing between sofas for no reason, or attempting self-suffocation in shoe boxes, or lying down to stare at their bowls incredulously for hours, cynically wondering what's for dinner, again. Their owners adore these palpable symptoms of derangement — *aw!* Laughing at mentally broken house pets is somehow not considered mean.

Tong Fuk cats are free, freer than the inmates, freer than the guards.

When my incarcerated colleagues and I filed between bungalows and playground to fulfil our duties of sleeping, eating, sewing and ball kicking, the most watchful stares did not come from the guards. Scores of feral cats monitored us from vantage points. Most were fixed, asexuality identified by a clipped ear. But neutering was evidently no more effective than the one child policy in population control. There were reportedly more than seventy plus spoiled felines which had marked Tong Fuk their territory.

'That's Black Bean. This is Nightmare,' a friendly *See Hing* pointed them out to me at the playground with parental pride. He spent his playground time purring at cats rather than chasing football.

Flower Lounge Black Bean and Tiger

'See that stripy one? That's Tiger.' Anyone could have guessed that one. He then picked up a creamy specimen rubbing against his ankle. 'This cutie pie is Pancake. *Hello sweetie*.' He never swore in front of cats.

As he picked a booger from Pancake's face, Long Hair crouched atop a garbage bin a few meters away, studying human behaviour. 'He's very naughty,' said the Cat Slave, throwing a loving glance at Long Hair who evidently didn't care a whit about his opinion. If it could roll its eyes, it would have.

Naughty? What a stupid word from a thug. Naughty humans like you get locked up. Naughty cats like me get admired. Go cry about it. Meow.

In Lai Chi Kok, their phantom existence was creepily announced through caterwauling. I had not spotted a single cat there, not even the shadow of one, but their wailing punctured my smothered dreams night after night. Here at Tong Fuk, they were high profile and ubiquitous. Some were the most beautiful cats I had ever seen. The genetic superiority of wild procreation over fussy breeding was all too obvious.

Many inmates shamelessly begged for their attention. They doted on the furry critters like lonely old ladies. Out of earshot of the cats, the Cat Slave once told me that he had chopped off someone's leg in broad daylight on a busy street in Mongkok for a handsome fee. I had said wow. Listening to his high-pitched come kitty kitty now, I couldn't believe he would hurt a fly. Perhaps his story was pure fantasy. Perhaps like most prisoners, he lived in low-cost housing, and was burdened by a risky unsteady job with odd hours. He probably never had the opportunity to be a pet parent, until now.

Some American prisons have run pet adoption programmes which reportedly helped reduce violence and anti-social behaviours. The cat programme at the maximum-security Indiana State Prison, for example, worked with animal shelter agencies and kept seventy-five cats. In fine American style, each cat was given its own ID badge with adorable names like Ziggy and Buffy. There was an application and approval process, of course, including panel interviews. The adopted cats lived in the inmates' cells for the duration of their stay, and were attached to their owners with a leash during yard time. Naturally, there were strict rules to follow, with stipulated punishments for breaking them, or failing to clean the litter box. It sounds like another layer of stress to me, and one more tool for the screws to wield before the cons. *Hey, one more word, and I'll take your cat away!* But the experimental project was famously successful, with a long waiting list.

By comparison, Tong Fuk was socialistically laissez-faire. Unofficial cats shared the inmates according to a scheme unbeknownst to the relevant authority. Everyone was free to give them names. Call them what you like, they won't recognise or respond anyway. To the free-roaming kitties, badges and leashes were totally out of the question.

In the dining hall, they shifted under the tables during mealtime. Inmates fought to ingratiate themselves with the felines before they moved on to the next bidder. Choice inmates offering

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the best morsels in a prompt and dignified manner, without demanding fatuous enticement rituals, might receive a laptop purr if they also gave a good massage.

On chicken wing days, foreman Ming Suk, a diminutive old Triad with mousey eyes flickering between cunningness and melancholy, one of a few older inmates who never talked to me, would go around the tables to collect bones for his cat masters. Due to seniority, he had an unfair advantage over my Cat Slave *See Hing* in competing for feline favour. He carried with him a bag of cat biscuits which must have cost him dearly. Cat food was not an official item. I had no idea where and how he got it. I supposed a small and innocuous prerogative for the elders of a largely 'self-disciplined team' was not unreasonable.

Lo and behold! None of the cats would touch the minnows we prisoners were fed five nights per week. When tossed a piece, inexperienced kittens would sniff, shudder and walk away. Older and wiser ones looked away. The officer in charge of meal planning should look into this highly unusual animal behaviour to learn something about the fish they feed human inmates.

It's late evening at the dormitory. The main lights have just been turned off.

A silhouette appears in the moonlight at one of the elevated windows. It slides effortlessly through the bars, followed by a companion, then another. They perch silently at the sill for a moment, looking down onto lumps of humans underfoot. Some are snoring. Some listening to the news on the radio, as if it has relevance to their isolated lives. Some are repeating the same stories to each other, the one about breaking a beer bottle over someone's head at Prat Avenue.

Some are waiting, anticipating, yearning for their arrival.

Having assessed the harem, the hairy princes jump down and proceed to sniff out the lucky ones whom they plan to spend the night with. There are never more than a few royal visitors. Their Hairy Highnesses know how to ration. Giving too much in one go would spoil these thugs. Three per night. Maybe five on a full moon. No more. They must have had a duty roster to keep these feeding hands hopeful and eager.

Sycophantic admirers clamour for their attention. Now, who are the castrated ones here?

Hello Darlings... Meow meow! Kitty kitty kitty. Me me me!

The humans crawl and fawn over the visitors with hard-earned junk food. The princes sample a little from each before settling down with a chosen few who massage just right. Rejected suiters sigh and pull prickly blankets over long faces.

The night is long. Time's precious even with nine lives.

Before dawn broke, they would leave simultaneously. They saunter to the windows, hop and float up the sill silently, then glance back to give a perfunctory parting meow. Watching them gliding insouciantly through unyielding steel bars, returning to the dark side, is tormenting to those yearning for freedom underneath. As usual, admiration turns into slavish adoration.

One torrential evening, a young Triad rescued a newborn kitten from a makeshift nursery constructed by him inside a rubbish bin in the courtyard. The mother must have been stuck in

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the rain somewhere. Where are its brothers and sisters? I wondered as the young man dried the smuggled kitten with his face towel. He then fed it milk equivalent to a day's wages.

Next morning, the rain had stopped. He returned it to the mother. The four-legged mum was so stirred that she tripped over the gutter while hurrying away, kitty dangling from her mouth. It would have made a touching video clip, the kind which attracted millions of *likes*.

Cats kept the place relatively rat free, a small miracle considering the amount of freely strewn junk food and consumable garbage. I had only witnessed one rat during my stay at Tong Fuk — a super giant the size of a small cat. It misjudged its own size, and got stuck between two bars in the workshop door while escaping. Ming Suk put it inside a transparent plastic bag and left it outside for the cats to toy with. Only a professional crook could dream of such an entertainment. Unfortunately, the rest of us had to work, so missed the sadistic spectacle. The noise was wild. It would have made another viral clip unless the amount of blood exceeded community standards.

* * *

Routine and Cuisine



The most important and versatile article to a prisoner

Somehow, humans fantasise themselves lovers of variety, serendipity, challenges, and, believe it or not, adventures. This romantic illusion, though far from true for the average person, has created an irrational discontent about a steady and predictable life such as the one we lived at Tong Fuk.

Steadied by penitentiary monotony, most days at Tong Fuk were predictable if not identical, seldom eventful. Unfortunately, not everyone appreciated repetitious felicity.

The morning siren was a bit loud. The deaf would have been woken by the onslaught of its vibration. A few youngsters would nevertheless hold on to their blankets and unfinished nightmares, and be defiantly asleep. A guard would come around momentarily to kick their beds, directing expletives at their mothers.

The rest of us, a couple of dozen dreary and grumpy convicts, dragged ourselves to the toilet, one hand holding the outlet of a pressurised bladder, yelling: Fai Dee Lah! Dew Lay Lo Mo Hai — hurry up, and blessed be to your mother, and so on, as usual, et cetera. Water and urine splashed freely. Coughing, spitting, and swearwords bubbled through toothpaste, charging the room with raw energy.

The gate unlocked shortly. A uniformed guard of honour awaited right outside to welcome us to breakfast. Filing past them, shrouded in industrial dentifrice, discharging overnight phlegm and flatulence, cons squinted against a hot new day with disgust, or moaned about the cold spring rain. To prisoners and teenagers, the day was never quite right.

The guard of honour looked into our carrying bags for anything out of the ordinary, knowing that nothing would be out of the ordinary. Formalities were imperative to reinforce discipline and respect.

A less-than-one-minute walk took us to the dining hall. Where else? While waiting for everyone to settle, prisoners yawned loudly. Soon, the room would be filled with the sound of yawning, like a band of musicians tuning their instruments before the show. Wishing each other

good morning wasn't necessary. In fact it would have been queer to wish anyone good morning. The first meal of the day commenced after a careful headcount. Invariably, not just typically, it would be squash and rice garnished with a bit of meat. After a slow breakfast, the rest of the morning would be dispatched perfunctorily with half-hearted labour.

Lunch was light, long, lazy, and lousy, distracted by television. As we ate, recycled soaps provided *entertainment* at full volume. These noontime replays at Channel Tong Fuk were not amusing, or silly, or funny, or ridiculous, or beautiful, or inspiring, but *See Hings* watched them with zen-like focus. TVs kept prisoners anchored more effectively than cast-iron balls and chains, but were noisy even when nobody moved.

A few inmates were extraordinarily pious. One of my table-mates spent a good ten minutes uploading gratitude to God before each meal, while us heathens chewed. I actually regard saying grace before meals is one of the most meaningful religious practices. Too many of us take food for granted, and waste far too much. However, such extravagant pre-meal ceremonies would have invited derision or medical attention out in the free world. Convicts were commendably open-minded without making a big fuss about being open-minded.

After a long lunch, we returned to the workshop for more half-hearted labour.

Playground time started at about four. At school, I had once been forced to play football, like it or not. Tong Fuk was more liberal; football was voluntary. I did *Zharm Zhong* — a stand-up meditation — instead, and let my mind rove.

Dinner time. We ambled back to the dining hall like privileged school boys returning from polo, chatting in good spirits, swearing, feeling hungry, trying not to think about deep fried fish.

After dinner, we lined up outside the dining hall to be searched with a metal detector. A basket of gooey cloudy buns and a bucket of syrupy milk powder solution awaited us en route to the dorms. Hadn't we just eaten? Yes we had. But the CSD wanted to make sure that we were adequately fed, probably in compliance with some international convention. The milk drink, supposedly imported from Germany, had a concentration camp feel to it. It was sadistically sweet, and gripped the tongue on contact. Most inmates declined, but the ritual persisted. It had been like this for many years. After we have all filed past, they would pour it down the drain.

A typical evening at Tong Fuk was more studious than boarding school. Half the prisoners would read, write, or listen to the radio with earplugs, or play chess furtively (chess was not permitted without supervision due to gambling concerns). A few would exercise, pushing their torsos up against gravity repeatedly, or lifting the water buckets again and again. Muscles to gangsters were like neckties to bankers, not necessarily useful for the job, but essential for the image.

Young cons livened up the dorm with rowdy games and routine shenanigans. Each night, they traded junk food with the quarter across the hallway. Bags of chips and whatnot were tossed back and forth across two layers of bars. Why did they exchange confections abundantly available on both sides? Just for fun, I supposed. There was evidently a functional honour system to record these hectic inter-cell transactions, as disputes were rare.

Meanwhile, young prisoners took turns visiting their 'nightclub'.

Night-time activities eventually gave way to collective snoring. Everyone was one day closer to discharge. Tomorrow will be largely the same. The only variables would be the three main meals which differed from day to day according to a weekly recurrent cycle.

Inmates were well-fed in four daily instalments: breakfast, lunch, dinner and bedtime snack. For slammer grub, the meals were very reasonable, balanced and generally of good quality, albeit mysterious in parts. The menu was precise and consistent. One knew exactly what will be served for dinner tonight, tomorrow, and the third Thursday nineteen months into the future, assuming one would still be in jail. Not everyone enjoyed such a high degree of predictability, however. Some took the perpetually recurrent menu as a subtle form of punishment. It didn't bother me though. Since retirement, I had been eating the same dish for lunch most days at home — bean sprouts with fried tofu pockets and rice.

The cyclic menu, repeated weekly for as long as anyone knew, is reproduced as follows. I hope it's not classified information:

	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Mon	Pork, squash, rice	Sweet red bean gruel + bread	2x Chicken wing (mid- section), veggies, rice, orange
Tue	Beef, squash, rice	Salty peanut gruel + bread	Fish! hardboiled egg, veggies, rice, orange
Wed	Chicken wing, squash, rice	Sweet mung bean gruel + bread	Fish! fried tofu (tofu pok), veggies, rice, orange
Thu	Composite pork meatball, squash, rice	Salty soya bean gruel + bread	2x Chicken wing (mid- section), veggies, rice, orange
Fri	Beef, squash, rice	Sweet peanut gruel + bread	Fish! hardboiled egg, veggies, rice, orange
Sat	Chicken wing, squash, rice	Salty tofu skin gruel + bread	Fish! veggies, rice, orange
Sun	Composite beef meatball, squash, rice	Sweet milk tea (a highly popular treat) + salty purple bean gruel + bread	Fish! fried egg, veggies, rice, orange

Breakfast was squash, always squash, randomly chopped up squash. By the way, squash butts are actually edible and harmless, just a bit woody.

The British gave European and Indian prisoners special treatment. This accommodating tradition had been gradually extended to other minorities. Special meals could now be requested for ethnic, religious or health reasons. ONs (foreign inmates) ate bread and cold greasy eggs for breakfast. Muslims ate pork-free dishes prepared in a chaotically non-halal kitchen, flavoured with Indian curry. It seemed that those in charge of the prison community couldn't tell the difference between halal and curry, and believed that anyone from west of Lantau Island ate curry. I actually lived west of Lantau, and loved curry. These days, the cons could also request beef-free or vegetarian meals. A diabetic *See Hing* told me that they were fed essentially regular meals with most of the flavours extracted.

Vegan and peanut-free options were not available. Folks allergic to wheat or peanuts better not break the law. That said, CSD meal service was already more considerate and diverse than some airlines. Once a choice had been made, however, no change of mind would be entertained. I once asked a friendly officer if I could switch to vegetarian for a while (curry would have been nice but that required a change of ethnicity or religious commitment). He gave the standard answer rhetorically: 'Does this look like a fucking hotel to you?'

'Ha! No lah, Ah Sir,' I laughed at the highly predictable reply. 'This is flower lounge. Much classier.' He laughed too.

Of the three main meals, lunch was the most disagreeable. In the above tabulated menu, the atrocious word *gruel* appears seven times in the middle column. That's right, seven times. Once a day, a medieval gaol gruel was served. Watery gruel was ladled straight from a plastic bucket (the kind one finds in wet corners of public lavatories) on the floor into our multi-purpose mugs. We then picked up a thick slab of generously buttered white bread. Occasionally — aberrantly *without* a recurrent pattern — a smear of tasteless and odourless brown stain would appear on top of the butter. *See Hings* told me it was fruit jam, but I had my doubts; it didn't taste anything like jam.

I had been reminded on numerous occasions that Tong Fuk was a prison, not a five-star hotel. Taking this hard fact into account, the meals were actually quite good. Yet, inmates grumbled, which is understandable. They were remarkably creative in jailbreaking the seemingly insurmountable menu. The office boys at Fingerprint Room made fantastic toasts with an electric iron.

Back at the dorm, cheesy *onigiri* – Japanese rice balls – were the young thugs' favourite.

Recipe: 1) Plain rice smuggled from dinner 2) Mix rice with crushed Cheetos — an industrial cheesy puff 2) Mould by hand into fist-size balls 3) Place rice ball inside all-purpose mug 4) Warm with hot water in the toilet.

Disgusting. But I salivated when the smell of cheese and rice emanated from the toilet sink. That's what imprisonment could do to a person's palate.

On the wall separating the kitchen and the dining area was a slot at waist level. A *See Hing* in the kitchen would scoop gravy onto a wobbly plastic plate of food, then push it through the slot onto a ledge at our side. The server could not see his customer on the other side.

Gravy was one of the very few things a prisoner could exercise freedom of choice. As we stood before the food slot, we yelled out our preferences — no gravy; little gravy; extra gravy, please! One Tuesday morning (beef on Tuesday mornings, see table above), having survived the previous day and renewed my confidence in life, I was in frivolous spirits. When my turn came, I extemporaneously requested medium rare please! Haha, that was fun. Not knowing how to respond to my request, the system hung. A couple of worldly jailbirds giggled. Sensing the serving inmate frozen behind the slot and the duty guard's reprimanding stare, I panicked.

'Sorry, sorry. Sorry See Hing, just joking. Little gravy please.'

Luckily, the system promptly rebooted. The duty officer kept up his dirty look at me for a few more moments: 'Playing games, huh? Ah Cheong!' He knew that the old guy Ah Cheong could be spontaneously facetious.

'Just kidding, Ah Sir, my apologies.'

Luckily, he ignored me and looked away. Phew.

One had to be careful and tactful with jokes in this place. Trying to be funny was in principle okay, even welcome, provided that the joke was funny and, more importantly, readily understood, and *absolutely* impersonal. I had witnessed convivial discussions abruptly turning abusive, even violent, because of a wrong choice of word. It was not necessarily bad humour. Many of the fellows had hidden sensitive spots which even the owners were unaware of. Accidentally poked, it could explode like a land mine from a past war. Sarcasm, my absolute favourite, had no audience in Hong Kong in general. In jail, it should not be attempted under any circumstances. I understood the enormous risk involved without the Guardian Angel whispering. The slightest obscurity — such as my *medium rare* request — could have been misunderstood and resulted in an unpredictable response. That was stupidly risky, and really not that funny. I self-criticised as I walked back to the table, beef and rice in hand. Never pull anything like that again for as long as I'm in jail, I promised myself.

When I first arrived at Tong Fuk, I ordered extra gravy for lubrication. About a month on, I switched to *little gravy*. I was suffering from dizzy spells, and suspected that the salty slush was responsible. I had not had a body check up since nineteen, not even a reading of blood pressure or sugar level. One day, I finally decided to consult the medical officer at the infirmary. It turned out that my blood pressure was 74/114, assuming his machine was functional. In his pseudo-professional opinion, it was better than most young thugs. He prescribed two little pills anyway. 'Twice per day for a week.' They worked as miraculously as the boil ointment at Lai Chi Kok. In two days, my dizziness stopped. I asked the officer what the miracle pill was when he watched me swallowing it at the dinner hall. 'Vitamin C,' he winked, a finger above my tongue.

'So,' I said after swallowing. 'It was Vitamin C deficiency. Good diagnosis!'

Breakfast was my favourite meal of the day. Lunch was horrendous mainly due to a personal dislike of bean gruels; they were quite popular in general.

The only universally detested dish was dinnertime fish. When a child, my mother used to force-feed me vomit-inducing omega fish oil. She was otherwise a kind and loving person. The fish at Tong Fuk tasted *much* worse. Unfortunately, fish prepared the exact same objectionable

way was on the menu every night except Monday and Thursday. Though we knew with absolute certainty what was coming, there would be a faint collective sigh when the first fish, doused with gravy, slid through the slot.

These cat-spurned minnows were about the size of the middle finger of a short fat person. I suspected they were deep-fried hours before dinner, then left in open air to absorb moisture while oil drained, and the carcasses turned limp. Small fish with countless tiny bones scattered throughout the body are puzzling. These fine bones are not attached to any discernible structure, therefore obviously not serving a physiological purpose. The Tong Fuk fish took this biological mystery to new heights. They had more bones than meat. What could have been their anatomical function? These slivery bones must have had felt like deep splinters when the poor creature swam. What was God thinking when he designed this one? Or was He giggling sardonically? I ate each and every one of them anyway. It was a form of physical challenge and spiritual disciplining. My late father had taught me to never waste food. *Eat whatever's served*. *Never complain about food*. I wonder if he would have made an exception for Tong Fuk fish.

The teeny chicken wings tasted surprisingly good, even organic, perhaps free-range, but nonetheless perplexing. They were super small, evidently removed from XXXS spring chickens. What did they do with the rest of the baby birds? I'm sure there wasn't a market for miniature wingless chickens. Had never seen one anyway.

Thursday pork and Sunday beef balls were mushy and slippery and indistinguishable from each other, but kind of tasty. However, they didn't resemble anything originating from a pig or a cow. I'm not one of those inquisitive individuals who always demand to know the biological, nutritional, and molecular compositions of everything before putting it into their mouths. But I was a hobbyist conspiracy theorist, and my faith in the government was at a low ebb. Looking at these composite meatballs, my first association was tumours removed in operation theatres, though I had never seen one. What exactly do they do with these clinical wastes?

'This menu was designed by a dietician from the department,' an inmate told me. He was a regular, and knew how things worked.

'When?' I asked, as if it mattered.

'Ooo, long ago. Always like this.'

Was the dietician still employed? If he was, then what the hell had he been doing all those years. Let's assume he once laboured slowly and surely to create this delicately balanced diet in six days. On the seventh, he rested. Job well done. Then what? If he had retired, then who was his successor, and what was he doing to kill time in the office, as we prisoners ate in accordance with *the* historical menu?

* * *

The Nightclub



I used government thread to sew this biscuit wrapper into a useful storage bag

Hollywood loves sex and perversion. Prisons on screen are often full of hairy, ultra muscular, stinky, beastly cons, shimmering with sweat, indiscriminately sex-crazed without due respect to gender, age, religion, situation, or political persuasion. Maybe that's reality, who knows? Reality often defies comprehension. Jails are supposed to be horrible anyway, right?

In my subconscious indoctrinated with pragmatic survival strategies, anyone unlucky enough to be thrown in jail, guilty or not, should learn to lie low and suppress all non-essential desires until the storm passes. Sex, especially sex with a stinky specimen of the same gender, is truly very extremely absolutely non-essential, to a heterosexual man anyway. But what if the movies actually reflect the ugly incomprehensible reality behind bars? An irrelevant worry festered.

Fortunately, after a few days at Lai Chi Kok, I couldn't detect any immediate sign of Hollywood. Then a ludicrous episode happened. An inmate in his fifties was caught masturbating while speaking with his visiting young wife on the other side of the glass partition. His uncontainable outburst caused everyone in the crowded room to curse, laugh, and scream. It made him the talk of the can for days.

The farcical incident was comical. Yet it highlighted an extent of desperation which justified apprehension. Rationally, I did not expect myself to be a hot target of sexual assault at this age. But cons were supposedly psychopaths, sparing nobody. Anytime, anyone, anywhere...

In a civilised jail like Tong Fuk, inmates are well fed, securely locked up in a scenic environment with ample fresh air. Besides a lousy fate, there isn't much else to complain about. However, some basic things—sex, for example—are denied. It's a jail after all, not a motel. But in practice, suppressing basic needs may backfire. The relevant authority obviously understands that, and draws the line, or blind, with that in mind.

Flower Lounge The Nightclub

One of the three toilets in my dormitory was fenced off with plastic partitions, loosely fitted with a wobbly door. The translucent panels were plastered over on the inside with newspaper and girly photos, using toothpaste as adhesive. This blatant violation of the rules was somehow overlooked by the guards. I noticed this exceptionally private corner on my first day at L1, and hid inside it at high frequency to squat and think. A cellmate promptly noticed my fake diarrhoea and gave me a stern friendly advice: 'Shit there!' he pointed to the adjacent latrines. I said okay without seeking clarification.

Soon enough, I found out why. I had been faking defecation in the community Nightclub. The *See Hing* warned me off for my own sake.

Most evenings, a few inmates would take turns to visit the Nightclub, carrying magazines with images of middle-aged oversized women cladded in parachute-looking bikinis. It would be grossly misleading to label them pornography. In fact, they were so off-turning I wondered who published them, and who the targeted readers were. I hadn't paid attention to newsstands for a long time but seriously doubted that these magazines were generally available. Well, just another Tong Fuk puzzle. Anyway, humans were extraordinarily adaptable under extraordinary circumstances, and the boys were under extraordinary circumstances. Any remote suggestion of an almost naked female was enough to stimulate their captive imagination.

The Nightclub was shared with commendable order and discipline, requiring no advance booking. The patrons also shared sticky magazines with each other. As the club was a convertible establishment, it needed a little preparation before use. The visitor first placed the grey plastic garbage bin upside down over the squat toilet-bowl. In the unlikely event that some garbage had missed the floor and ended up in the bin by accident, he would first empty it onto the floor. The inverted bin would then serve as a lounge stool, spanning precariously over the fissured ceramic can.

Dress code was anything audacious and unpretentious. There was no cloakroom service. More libertine visitors would stride to the club stark naked, proudly exhibiting an anticipatory erection, magazine and toilet roll in hand, declaring aloud to no one in particular his intimate intention: *Yahoo! Nightclub time!* I felt awkward and uptight in their reality. Whatever had happened to thugs in this world, it was a weird change.

Normally, once the club was occupied, nobody would disturb. It was the one square meter in Tong Fuk where an inmate could be alone and unseen. But there's exception to everything. One evening, a few boys tiptoed towards it while one of their pals was inside. They yanked the door open, screaming *police raid!* It was delinquently amusing, though not nearly as funny as their convulsive laughter suggested.

Personal intimacy between inmates was rare and discreet, nowhere near Hollywood. Out of a total of seventy or so men in the Common Room, there was only one obvious couple. I didn't share a dorm with them, so my observations were mainly from the dining hall and playground.

They looked in their late twenties. In the Common Room, they always sat together, like a pair of mandarin ducks, at a Number Gang table. They were not very social, keeping mostly to themselves, doing time together in front of the television. The smaller thug often lied down on the bench, head on the thighs of his bigger friend who would gently stroke his hair as they

Flower Lounge The Nightclub

watched lunchtime soap. That was the extent of their public display. The guards didn't mind. Fine. But neither did their gangster colleagues. When I was a teenager, gangsters were skinny, tough, macho, violently homophobic. Hong Kong tough guys had become astonishingly liberal.

By tradition, rapists had it toughest in jail. Sex offenders were held well beneath contempt by both prisoners and screws. Their situation was similar to the poor fat rat Ming Suk bagged and left out for the wild cats. Their stories are better relayed as fiction.

According to a young See Hing, this time-honoured practice had been fading.

Not too long ago, sex offenders were dregs of the scum. Career criminals despised them. They had to be away from home every now and then to serve sentences. 'Anyone who dares take advantage of our women will get his dick smashed,' a middle-aged convict assured me in no uncertain terms. There was unanimity over the treatment of sex criminals. Unfortunately, according to my interlocutor, sex crimes had become dubious and debatable these days. 'Some chicks report rape to the cops to revenge a nasty separation or innocent cheating. It's fucking nuts man!'

'What's innocent cheating?' I asked.

'You cheat, you know, without meaning to,' he explained.

Punishing sex offenders who could in fact be victims of unforgiving girlfriends didn't seem right. The underworld had its own rigid moral code and sense of fairness. Since romantic relationships had turned capricious and perfidious, and sense of honour obsolete, sex criminals can no longer be tortured without reasonable doubt, even though judges had ruled otherwise. But in the eyes of common criminals, judges had no common sense.

What about the guards?

According to Googleable American statistics, my favourite source of bafflement, about half of all sex crimes in jail are committed by the guards. Thankfully, at least at Tong Fuk, all the officers were bored and crabby, seriously traditional, and far from devious.

* * *

Sitting in Flower Lounge



Once upon a time...Photo taken from Tai Kwun exhibits

The English expression for imprisonment is going to jail, giving the impression of a degree of willingness. In Cantonese slang, being in jail is *chor garm*, *or chor fa tang*, literally 'sitting in jail', or 'sitting in flower lounge'. While *flower lounge* is euphemistic, *sitting* reflects hard reality.

Given a choice between forced indolence and forced labour, I suspect most people would opt for the former, unless they have experienced sitting in a room full of noisy men who have no other occupation but *sitting in a room full of noisy men*, day after day, year after year. In that non-event, time — that mystically elastic entity which Einstein said varies with speed, that abstract marker of life which prisoners are condemned to serve — may gum up and stall. People fret death because it ends time, something which we instinctively want as much as possible without questioning, in spite of the pain which longevity promises. Ironically, law breakers are awarded the much envied luxury of 'excess time' for punishment.

The dining/Common Room was the central point of my Tong Fuk life. It had seventeen grey fibreglass tables (each seating up to eight), an open toilet, and a shower room. Looming above these amenities were five competing television sets tuned to two or more channels at full blast. I had not had a TV at home since 1982, and had long forgotten how persistently mind-numbing it was. Amazingly, Hong Kong soaps had not evolved since I last watched in the late 1960s. Nostalgic values notwithstanding, these zombifying devices deserved to be jailed.

Flower Lounge Sitting in Flower Lounge

We were bombarded with Syrian news *every* single day — *every* single day! — *every* single day! Just as in Libya, that tiny African nation gang-raped and destroyed by some of the world's topmost military powers, nameless rebels had organised a widespread armed revolt in Syria. Modern revolutions appear to have gone faceless and inorganic, gotten rid of charismatic and visionary personalities, or a comprehensible cause. With Syria dominating prime time news, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Guantanamo Bay had retreated from mainstream attention, hence the collective memory and conscience of the television-watching multitude.

I kept such opinions strictly to myself, of course. Initiating a discussion on imperial politics at the dining table of a Hong Kong prison would be unwise, though I normally regarded the conventional wisdom of avoiding politics, sex, and religion at the dining table more fatuous than wise. What else should people who are close enough to eat together talk about? The dinner roll?

My dinner roll is very soft. What about yours, darling?

Oh, mine as well, my dear, but the third bite was softer than the second.

Huh, is that right? How interesting.

But I was in jail. Better be stupid and boring than tendentious. I knew that without having to consult the Guardian Angel thing.

However, enough was enough. I finally muttered 'What? Syria again?' to myself, as I unhurriedly spooned rice into my face, leaving the fish for last.

My table-mate heard me. He had already finished his meal, and taken three puffs of aftermeal smoke. He carefully inserted his unfinished cigarette into a plastic ballpoint pen cap to snuff it out, put it into his pocket for later enjoyment, then explained as-a-matter-of-factly: 'Looks like the Americans wanna bomb them. Syria's in deep fucking shit for a long time to come.'

'Why do you say that?' I agreed with him, but was curious about his reasoning. Most *See Hings* were under-educated, and full of common sense. They needed it for survival.

He explained: 'Haven't you noticed? They always have the same fucking news non-stop before dropping real bombs.'

'I see.'

During our short exchange, the TV had moved on to other crisis.

The stock market fell that day because the Euro Crisis was deepening, commented the analyst. Barely twenty-four hours ago, when we were fed my favourite *tofu pok* contaminated with fish, he opined that the market had rallied because the Euro Crisis was looking good, really good. Global economy was changing fortune on an hourly basis.

'Don't waste time lah, all fucking fake,' my friend muttered, sucking his teeth.

That was April 2012, long before the term *fake news* entered the public discourse.

In jail, television was only the second hardest thing to get used to. My cushion-enfeebled *gluteus maximus* found the chairs and benches much harder. To be fair, they were not designed to torture inmates. The duty guard's chair next to the entrance, wooden and cold, painted

Flower Lounge Sitting in Flower Lounge

hopeless grey, raised like a tennis umpire's, was equally unyielding. It wasn't even padded with as much as a piece of thin fabric to dampen the punishing pressure.

During showers, I had noticed many hindquarters bruised in the middle of the cheeks, giving them a panda look. It puzzled me at first, until rough skin appeared on my own buttock. I couldn't see them, but they felt like two round patches of sand paper. The adaptive human body and mind often respond to external pressure by growing callouses.

Each morning, we sat around the dining table for breakfast. After eating, we sat for at least an hour before toddling off to the workshop — less than a minute away — where hard grey plastic stools awaited our delinquent arses. The stools had a hole the size of a mini-doughnut in the centre. An empty hole — with nothing but soft air within its boundary — had to be reasonably accommodating, right? Wrong, at least not these ones with stiffened edges. Shifting my seat in search of the phantom soft-spot was maddening.

After lunch or dinner, we sat around the dining hall for another hour or more as stalled time collapsed onto itself.

On Sundays and public holidays, we spent the whole day (except two precious playground hours if the weather was good) in the dining hall, sitting. Inmates grouped according to gang affiliation held *company* sponsored junk food feasts. Sunday chips and cheese-sticks seemed to be the only benefits gangsters got in return for a monthly membership due of two packs of fags per head. A typical prisoner's monthly salary could buy about ten packs of a local smoke which no one but Hong Kong cons had ever heard of. Taxation by In-Gang Revenue worked out to be approximately twenty percent, quite a bit higher than the prevalent rate in our tax friendly city.

Kai Zis (those without gang affiliation) like myself would watch TV, play chess, read, write, or attempt to chat over the party noise, sitting down. One could in theory walk around the crowded and slippery hall to promote blood circulation. That would be like taking a leisurely stroll through strange neighbourhoods where beer drinking boys warm up over a bonfire of waste tyres in the middle of the pavement. Tong Fuk was a reasonably peaceful place, but full of boundaries, seen and unseen. Better just sit tight.

The layout of the dining hall was open and transparent as usual. Two of the three squat toilets were one with the dining area, with only a virtual barrier. The third one, tucked away at the corner, was relatively secluded. To neutralise the potential threat of privacy, an observation window big enough to allow eye contact between the diners and the defecator had been installed.

Any open toilet in a dining area is bound to look incongruous. The ones at our dining room were also overused, wilfully neglected, and contemptuously abused. Stripped of dignity and pretence, the stained bowls were ghastly. Installation art making angry social statements. Anything and everything unwanted was dumped into them. Though ultra disgusting, there was a fascinating side to a veteran sewage engineer like myself. Ancient cracks and fissures on the porcelain surface had self-healed with bio-growth, giving rise to a web of anchored slime camouflaged in the colour of night soil. A thriving microbial community had settled in dynamic equilibrium, serving unintended pre-treatment functions. Unexpectedly, they did not stink. Heavy use and powerful flushing kept them adequately aerobic.

Flower Lounge Sitting in Flower Lounge

Adjacent to the toilets and *Kai Zi* tables was the shower area. Big drops of viscous condensates created by the steamy showers rained down from the ceiling. Anything left underneath it would become soaked. Most inmates stripped at the table and walked to the showers naked. When done, they would return *au naturel* to dry at the table, eyes on TV, watching Damascus.

* * *

To Whom It May Concern



I might have received the most letters in the Class of 2012 of Tong Fuk

I had lost the physical stamina to write extensively — say, for more than half an hour — in longhand. Pen-wielding muscles had withered from disuse. Proteins destined for the fingers had been commandeered by the pads to facilitate keyboard tapping.

In Tong Fuk, I had to redevelop the neglected muscles and rebuild calluses in order to write — sometimes for hours — without cramping or hurting. My long forgotten habit of pushing the pen far too hard against the left edge of the first knuckle of the middle finger came back promptly to remind me that bad habits may go dormant, but never die. Spelling without autocorrect and writing Chinese without alphabetical *pinyin* input turned out to be problematic. Luckily, literacy at *Kai Zi* tables was considerably higher than Tong Fuk average. Table-mate Stanley was more reliable and responsive than online dictionaries most of the time. Without him, I might have found it too embarrassing to correspond with friends and family in typo infested letters.

Satu's daily letters were an embarrassing source of vital comfort.

All mails were opened and marked with the recipient's number. At dinner time, an officer would announce the numbers at the top of his voice before handing them out. When it came to me, he would yell '365820, again!' with a teasing grin. Besides Satu, many friends who had never written me before also sent letters, asking the same questions: How did that happen? (How would I know?) How're things in there? (Well, what do you think?) Can we come visit? (You think this is a boy scout camp?) What do you need? (Uh...where do I start?)

I had to copy similar replies repeatedly, tearing out pages from my precious notebooks. To lighten the tedium, I designed a personalised letterhead logo — a crewcut smiley face flanked by huge Dumbo ears (my hallmark feature) behind a few vertical lines, captioned *From Behind the Bars of 365820*.

Flower Lounge To Whom It May Concern

Before my first pay check, I had to borrow stamps and envelopes from fellow *See Hings*. Outgoing letters had to be placed in unsealed envelopes, affixed with the right postage, then deposited into a transparent plexiglass mailbox next to the entrance of the Common Room. Besides family correspondences with Satu and Claire, my replies to concerned friends were largely identical.

Dear XXX,



So, it takes me going to jail for you to write me a nice letter, huh?

Yes, what a dreadful surprise, totally unexpected. I might have stupidly jinxed myself by planning a post-verdict celebration party. Hard to believe anyone would find the accomplice witness credible. Well, the good news is that my 'cynical' worldview has been vindicated.

I'm trying to get the most out of this predicament though, exploring a kind of unexpected freedom in here. Everyone mixes 'freely' on an equal footing. It's a unique and educational experience, if not always pleasant. So far, I've met quite a few generous characters — very fortunate under the circumstances.

I've always been environmentally aware in theory and intent. But prison life is environmentally correct in practice. Nothing — except water and the nightlight — is wasted. Even tissue paper wrappers are used to hold misc. articles such as postage stamps.

Satu has been visiting every week. The official allowance is twice per month but can be extended to once per week if we apply for special permission nicely. We have to submit a short list of visitors for approval, so, sorry, you can't just drop by after a BBQ outing at the beach to see how I'm doing.

In comparison with the ICAC, the CSD is definitely more human, not obviously driven by private agenda. Separation from my younger girl is the most painful part because of the lack of communication. Flower Lounge To Whom It May Concern

Application for appeal is underway, but I dare not predict our chances. Lawyers always say 50:50. Now I know they are actually being truthful, believe it or not. Common sense isn't relevant in the legal game.

I won't give up hope, but am trying not to think about the future, or the past. The dilemma is I don't wish to focus on the present either. I think the adage 'live in the moment' needs reconsideration. What if the moment is abhorrent? I'll save that for the next time we have a beer together, hopefully very soon.

Contrived positive thinking aside, adapting to being locked up is tough. Having adapted once, the prospect of repeating the process (should we lose the appeal and have to come back in after having been released on bail) becomes unthinkable. Oh well, one step at a time.

By the way, we don't wear striped uniforms, and only the guards wear the ball and chain.

See you, whenever, James, aka 365820

* * *

Visitors were allowed twice per month. With special approval, which was usually granted to well-behaved inmates like my good self, it could be increased to once a week. Lawyers and privileged persons such as Justice of the Peace and members of the Legislative Council (LEGCO) could visit anytime they wanted to. During my stay in Tong Fuk, a couple of LEGCO member friends visited. One was a radical stuntman in the assembly. Whenever he felt bored, he'd scream and shout and threw banana at the speaker just to get kicked out. He could then go home early for some quality family time, getting paid handsomely and strengthening his support base at the same time. One stone can kill three birds if you throw it right. He was a high school buddy. At the time, he was being charged with *disturbing the peace* for having done something obnoxious. He wanted to find out from me what prison life was *really* like, in case he got thrown into one. Having seen through his motive, I focused on the dark side.

The other ex-LEGCO and JP friend Choy So Yuk was from the conservative camp according to the prevalent labelling system in identity politics. In any event, she and my old school mate represented the extreme opposites in Hong Kong's comical political theatre. Their visits aroused the curiosity of a friendly guard, who asked me which side I was on.

'Neither lah,' I told him. 'It makes no difference. LEGCO is just show business, like the court.'

'Ah, I see.' He understood right away. I must have used the right analogy.

Contrary to internet wisdom, Satu and I did not treat our younger daughter Saara aka Comrade Xiaoping 'like a friend' because she was only eight. Folks our age simply don't build natural friendships with eight-year-olds, or vice versa. We loved, cared, and guided her as parents had done to young children since circa 20000 BCE. We didn't have the heart to

Flower Lounge To Whom It May Concern

relinquish parental responsibilities for the sake of appearing liberal and progressive. She was still new to the human world, needing guidance, nurturing, and security more than boring friendships from grown-ups who baby-talk as if their tongues were swollen.

Friends or not, we didn't normally lie to her except on obligatory fibs like Santa Claus. We didn't tell her about my trial because she was only seven when it started. In our judgement, she was potentially intelligent, kind of ready for the ridiculous truth, but not quite yet. Plus we were confident that the fiasco would soon be over. When I suddenly disappeared from home on February 29th, Satu had no choice but to lie on for the time being, until we knew more about the appeal. She hid my briefcase, and said I had left urgently for a work camp for my old company. It was technically true. Work camp had since become our family nickname for prison.

Comrade Xiaoping soon started to question, and insisted that Mum took her to visit me at the work camp which wasn't equipped with a telephone, something she found extraordinary. That visit never took place.

* * *

Guards



The guards thought the daily letters from Satu were rather odd in size

In ancient China, general perception of social ranking, though not rigid, reflected a pragmatic order based on productivity and relative importance to the emperors. Crouching and saluting underfoot the Son of Heaven were *soldiers and officials* whom he needed to exercise mandate, followed by *farmers*, *craftsmen*, *and merchants*. Merchants were at the bottom of respectable citizens. Entertainers and prostitutes and beggars were pariahs. Didn't even count. Investment bankers, had they existed, would have been in this category. In the modern world, this productivity based hierarchy has been upended. Besides low paid farmers whose absence meant the end of the world, other *real* jobs such as cleaning up and guarding prisoners are sneered at. The real reason is simple: They don't pay well.

Entertainers have become 'stars'. Shocking. When they imitate jail-guards in a movie, they put on an evil squint. In reality, the guards at Tong Fuk had minimal facial expressions except resigned boredom as the shift wore on. To the best of my judgement, none of them would be remotely interested in waterboarding prisoners for fun, unless it was an official order with a special allowance. Neither would they be inclined to sodomise sweaty criminals. No way. Seriously, who would? Ah, yes, Hollywood screws would. Is this difference culturally influenced? Or just a fabrication?

In prisons, strangers from unthinkable corners of society live closely together for a term of time, then go their own ways. In all likelihood, they may never meet again, especially for 'non-professionals' like myself. Like nomads chancing upon each other in the desert, courtesy cannot be taken for granted. Spontaneous kindness to a stranger under that situation is genuinely moving, especially when that stranger is me.

The Indian *Ah Sir* at Lai Chi Kok who prompted me to inform my wife about my imminent transfer also tried to quell my anxiety. 'Don't look so terribly worried lah,' he had said kindly. 'Tong Fuk's a fucking nice place.' He didn't need to comfort me. He didn't need to be nice. He

Flower Lounge Guards

didn't need to do anything. He had unquestionable authority over me, and our paths will most likely never cross again. He helped out of impulsive compassion, or pity. What else could it have been? He didn't even expect an emphatic 'thank you' which would probably have embarrassed him. My *Flower Lounge* experience verified one of infinite Chinese sayings for me: *The truly righteous are often from the dog-butcher class*. Outside the high walls of prison, similarly unconditional generosity was extremely rare among the tie-wearing class.

To be sure, many guards were officious and authoritative. Part of their job. Jail could otherwise be dangerously chaotic. But in general, even the most scary looking ones were helpful, ordinary, and neutral when I got to know them, far from *devious*.

The Correctional Services Department (CSD) had no incentive to frame or entrap. Guilty verdicts had already been clinched by others when they took over. Nor did they incline on passing further judgement on those who had fallen into their custody. Being downstream of justice, they had no influence or direct interest in the outcome of a trial. The crime rate affected workload, but not job security. They had a government *iron rice bowl* in hand. They could afford to be honest without prejudice.

In the court room, duty officers daydreamed next to anxious defendants in the dock. When a verdict was announced in English, *guilty* and *not guilty* were about the only words they needed to understand. Upon hearing the code word, they'll whip out the handcuffs, or open the dock to let the ex-defendant out. *Congratulations*. The room would be charged with celebratory vibes in that case. But the prosecution team would be pouting, the prosecutor deep in thought. A good sportsman don't give up easy. *What about appeal technicalities? Somehow, we're gonna nail him...*

Correctional officers seemed to understand the game of justice without judgement or illusion. Lowly paid lackeys seldom concern themselves with how and why the system is the way it is.

On the other hand, some upstream agencies made a living out of prosecution. Their liveried operatives were under performance pressure, systemically bribed with career incentives to nail suspects — the more the better. Swing the hammer hard. Drive the nail deep. The system leaned on them to be zealous, to presume all suspects guilty while reading them their rights, to craftily lure them into self-incrimination. Most suspects were nervous and vulnerable, easily trapped by experienced agents. Conscience? What conscience? Professionals were supposedly objective and unemotional. Conscience distracted professionalism. *That's right, part of the job*. The job was to prove guilt, make guilt by hook or by crook — oops, scrap that — it should be 'without perverting justice at any time' instead. Suspects were objectified targets against which professionals scored points. A high conviction rate looked good on career statistics. It meant job satisfaction, promotion prospects, contract renewal, et cetera, all good stuff. Innocence was the merchandise of expensive lawyers. No money? Uh, there's legal aid, *hehe*, followed by the Flower Lounge — all free of charge. So, *ready or not, here we come!* Just part of the job.

Lawyer Derek had warned me: 'Someone may tell him (the accomplice witness) to admit immediately to having lied when questioned, in order to deflect attacks on his credibility and gain the judge's confidence.'

Flower Lounge Guards

What?! Who's that someone, Derek?

He grinned with his mouth shut, that sly son-of-a-bitch.

One day, in the Common Room, after repeating another report on Syria, the TV anchor announced that ICAC Chief Investigator Cho Wing-nin and two of his senior colleagues were convicted of witness coaching. 'What a fucking surprise,' a table-mate commented, rolling his eyes, a limp matchstick dangling from the corner of his mouth. More than one insider friend had told me that witness coaching was common, but (or because it was) very difficult to prove. The DOJ was also generally sympathetic to such serious 'misdemeanours'. Complaints rarely made it to court. In Mr. Cho's particular case, according to the TV, the witness they coached in a cafe had been wired by the defence lawyer. *Haha*, so simple. From now on, they had better conduct illegal workshops in the sauna room, everyone stark naked. These crooks — officially exceptionally bad apples from a bushel of sweet and glittering ones — were sentenced to thirty months.

Welcome, boys!

A few inmates cheered and hi-fived across tables. I would have loved to join them, but remembered my vow to stay low profile. The spontaneous outburst showed why these corrupt anti-corruption agents would be incarcerated in isolation for their own safety. Unfortunately, solitary will probably stretch their upcoming days and years longer, much longer.

At first, I thought Tong Fuk was laid-back because it was low security. But experienced cons told me that screws were generally more affable in heavy duty slammers where big boys crouched, some for life. They had nothing to lose. The warden couldn't add posthumous penalty days to misbehaving lifers. Plus heavy-duty gangsters, though typically not the nitpicking type, could spill animosities over the walls onto the streets of Mong Kok if unduly bullied. Both guards and inmates in high security prisons were sensitive to the delicate balance, therefore respectful as long as the other party reciprocates.

Many guards and inmates had originated from the housing estates. At some stage, some became cops, some joined the CSD, others the Triad, all trying to make a living. Somewhere down the line, they met again behind bars, sometimes in different uniforms. They understood each other, and the red lines which bound them.

Probably influenced by movies as well, I couldn't help looking for signs of abuse in Tong Fuk, but found none. The last thing the screws wanted was trouble. The slightest trouble meant written reports, something they absolutely abhorred. They cherished monotonous harmony above all else. An ideal world would be one in which everyone played out their karmic roles dutifully: Read newspapers, gossip about movie stars, smoke, watch TV, visit the Nightclub, or just sit. Pile up the empty moments to make yet another full day — one less to discharge for the cons; one closer to the next pay cheque for the screws. Win-win *lah*, why not?

Of course, not everyone liked uneventful equilibrium. Some had to test the limits. Trouble makers were handled with remarkable patience, to a point. The most ominous incident I had earwitnessed was my first-night neighbour at Lai Chi Kok who was about to manslaughter his

Flower Lounge Guards

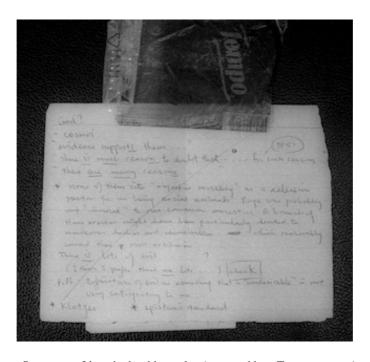
cellmate for failing to conjure up a cigarette. Even that, the Polygamist believed he would simply be locked away in isolation, ignored, and left alone to bang his head against the wall, wondering where the fuck could he get a fag two o'clock in the morning in the Lai Chi Kok Reception Centre.

One stormy night at Tong Fuk, rain was pelting down with a power which urbanites might have regarded supernatural. In the urban jungle, high-rises blocked rain and intercepted thunders with elevated rods. Dwellers close to ground level rarely experienced the raw force of everyday nature. Rural thunders and lightnings burst right outside, throwing tree shadows into our dorm like spears raining onto a fortress under siege. The kids were in an unquenchable party mood, possibly to hide fear, playing a drinking game with water to see whose bladder would burst first. Muffed by the torrent, their debauchery was sleep inducing. I was about to place a towel over my eyes for the night when a flash of lightning highlighted a young guard looking in through the grilles, captivated by the water-keg party. He was making his rounds between dorms, as stipulated in his job description. Water cascaded from his hat, face, and poncho. He obviously wanted to be on this side of the bars in that particular moment, downing water, frolicking, teasing, screaming obscenities, rather than being cold, wet, and lonely, performing a duty under a waterfall for a wee bit over minimum wage. He suddenly noticed me watching, and abruptly turned to leave as if caught skiving by his superior, sloshing into the dark storm.

One day, in the dining hall, a friendly old screw told me he was retiring next week. I think official retirement age was fifty-five, so he wasn't that old. I offered my congratulations. He gave a wry smile: 'About time lah, Ah Cheong. I've *chor fa tang* (sat in a flower lounge) for thirty-three years. Fucking murderers don't get sentences this long anymore, I tell you!' Thirty-three years is a very long time in jail. But he was still young, could still start another job in addition to a government pension for as long as he lived. Most Hong Kong people would be envious.

* * *

Know Thy Inmates



Scrap paper I kept in the shirt pocket (protected by a Tempo wrapper) for note taking anytime, anywhere

People get jailed for many reasons, most of them rooted in the mother of all evils — money, magnified by greed and simple bad luck. Playing investigative journalist in prison required patience and respect. I learned to be a good passive listener, welcoming the story rather than pushing for details. There were things that my jailmates didn't want to share. There were events which they themselves were unsure about, but felt the need to appear to be in total control, at least to themselves.

Within a few weeks in Flower Lounge, I had filled a second notebook with observations and personal anecdotes elicited from fellow inmates.

Some stories were so fantastic that fiction or illusion might have been involved, but that didn't necessarily make them false or irrelevant. All recollections are part truth and part imagination. Even when the narrator's intention was to wholeheartedly recall the truth, nothing but the truth, it would inevitably be skewed by perception and warped by time. Plus fantasies often reflect a person's wish of how past events should have been, unwittingly providing a subconscious element to the story, making it more 'complete'. Furthermore, compared with dull fabrications and unimaginative lies, some fantastic truths actually sound incredible. I have a few of these unusual experiences myself which I rarely share for that very reason.

Recognising the shifting nature of reminiscence, I held back scepticism and listened with an open mind, keeping substantial written notes to reinforce memory. Even so, many crucial pieces were missing when I tried to put the jigsaw pieces together afterwards. Real life stories happen only once, and can only be told a certain way once.

Tong Fuk was infested with Guardian Angels.

Everyone had his guard up against nearly everyone else. However, being together 24/7 helped promote a degree of acquaintance, especially among the older cons. The youngsters were much harder for me to know. They seemed suspicious, even mildly contemptuous, of anyone over thirty, and without Triad membership. I was at the far end of the detestation scale. Oh well, friendship cannot be forced. Mature criminals had more interesting anecdotes to share anyway. If approached gently and respectfully, kindled reminiscence often cruised on involuntarily. Sincere attention was enough to egg them on. Very occasionally, I poked gently for more details, but never dug hard, no matter how curious or impatient.

Many of my jailed friends had sensitive spots which they themselves may not even be aware of. I had witnessed amicable conversations abruptly turning ugly because an invisible wound was accidentally trod on. Beneath the generally calm surface of Tong Fuk were undercurrents of deep regrets and bitterness best left undisturbed. As a result, their recollections came to me like random pieces of an incomplete jigsaw set. Missing pieces had to be filled in with imagination. I subsequently assigned some of these composite half truths to fictional speculations, including reconstructing 'realities' which may or may not have existed.

Gollum

Two years my junior, he looked twenty years older. He was overly friendly and helpful when I first arrived. Knowing that I was an 'outsider', he breathed warm and secretive advices into my ears as one of his eyes scanned left right back front and above. *Don't trust anyone here, precious, especially who, and who, and who.* Since he was *here* as well, I heeded his advice and distrusted him immediately. His high-pitched metallic voice suggested a thin brittle tongue quivering behind his oversized white teeth — the only visibly straight feature on his person.

Otherwise, he was crooked all over. Sparse grey hair pasted across his forehead by static or lacklustre grease. Probably slightly above average height originally, he was now doubled over with a lopsided hunchback. His tiny nose was permanently scrunched up to support a pair of diving-mask size glasses, behind which asymmetrical eyeballs, optically magnified beyond human proportion, protruded like a cartoon figure from The Simpsons. One of them, the eyeballs, was murky with advanced cataract. The other one, strained by an unfair share of the workload, was obviously tired of maintaining constant vigilance, but still watching.

Gollum wasn't talkative. When he occasionally conversed at the dining table, he did so at the top of his voice. *Hey, everyone, listen, I ain't talking about anyone else*. Then, every so often, when the opportunity presented itself, he would whisper, short and sharp, into my ear. When done, he would pull back slightly to give me a one-eyed gaze and a deep set grin.

During mealtime, he prayed big time, pinching a pocket-size Bible, until his food got cold, or God had lost patience. *Okay okay. Now shut up and eat*. We shared the same table, but I never asked what he was in for. I sensed that whatever he had done was best left in the past. When I eventually learned from others why he was given a stiff sentence, I was glad that I had the good instinct not to have asked. It was *Statutory Rape*, a felony for sure, one which deserved capital punishment according to gangland customs. The first years of his jailed life were spent in high security Shek Pik, where the big boys left indelible marks on his body and mind.

He had been transferred to Tong Fuk in preparation for imminent discharge. His palpable anxiety made me realise that discharge wasn't the singularly good news I expected it to be. Nobody ever visited him. How would the outside world receive him? His wife had divorced him, but what would he say when he saw his son again? What if the demon in him had only been hiding dormant in his convoluted being, like a deadly virus, awaiting revival...

As freedom neared, he lost weight, and his one eye grew even more weary. He looked more Gollum. He inspired me to eventually write the short story *Gollum's Demon*. Gollum wasn't his nickname in Tong Fuk, I made it up to hide his identity. If he has kept up his reading habit, I'd be most interested in his opinion on the story. At the same time, I hope he never gets a chance to read it. Must stress that his 'demon' is purely a product of my wicked imagination. There was not the slightest hint that he was in danger of a relapse, I think...

Ah Kuen

Lawyer Derek once commented that prisons were full of idiots. I now feel qualified to disagree. His uninformed opinion was no more enlightened than the judge who said Marlboro was unwise to break the law for five hundred bucks. That said, some inmates were categorically weird, at least in the eyes of necktie wearing weirdos. Ah Kuen was one of them.

Middle-aged Ah Kuen was a gentle and hardworking guy who loved cigarettes with a passion. He gave a good strong massage, initially for free. Everyone who tried had nothing but praise for his magical hands. To the young thugs' credit, they forced him to accept three fags per session, and made it the mandatory market price. Cigarettes were the underground currency for everything. If not for the screws, one could probably get carried to the playground by a human taxi for a few cigarettes.

There was a waiting list for Ah Kuen's service, as he would perform only one massage per evening. When done, he'd open up the hard-earned cigarettes on the table next to me, and divide each into ten pinches of tobacco. He would then roll up each portion with a little square of thin paper cut out from gossamer toilet-roll wrappers. The finished mini rollups, each the thickness of a match stick, would be stored in a match box. Reengineering his massage income for the evening took him about an hour. Oddly, for someone who loved cigarettes so much, he wasn't a heavy smoker.

He was in for working in the black market with a fake ID. From the onset of his ten-month sentence, he openly enquired about where he could get another fake ID card, or a passport, when out. Though he seemed genuine, his openness made him a little suspicious. Nobody responded.

One day, he borrowed a book on herbal remedies from the library, and proceeded to copy the whole thing into his notebook word by word. Night after night, he laboured on copyright infringement after giving massage and rolling miniature fags. I asked him what it was for. He replied: 'Good book. Many useful information.'

'Why not just buy a copy?' I asked without thinking.

'It's very expensive,' he said. I had acted like Marlboro's judge.

I gave him my extra box of matches. He insisted on paying me back. But I didn't want a massage or a cigarette. After much protest, he finally accepted my gift.

Taiwan

Most evenings, Taiwanese Xiao Wang (known more simply as *Taiwan*) lay in the upper deck of his bunkbed next to mine, hands behind head, slightly bent legs crossed at the ankles, humming, smiling, evidently enjoying the time of his life at Tong Fuk.

Having been a soldier for years before becoming a professional conman, Taiwan was the undisputed champion in blanket folding. Probably in his early forties, never in a quiet mood, he was the premier feel-good factor in the dorm. He was enthusiastically friendly to everyone, though the mainlanders who also spoke Putonghua (Mandarin) were his favourites. The locals spoke Cantonese. He loved to tell bootcamp horror stories, and claimed Tong Fuk was paradise by comparison, as if reprimanding us for failing to appreciate what we had. I didn't ask how long he was in for, as length of stay obviously made no difference to someone who was clinically happy about this institution.

I took notes when he recounted his past life as a soldier, which made him even happier. He said nobody had ever taken his words so seriously, and that I made him feel celebrated.

Taiwanese bootcamp, still influenced by Generalissimo Jiang during his time, was apparently living hell:

- Each morning, blankets must be folded instantly into a tout perfect cube. Three unsatisfactory foldings made a punishable offence comprising folding blankets nonstop in the courtyard all morning without food or drink.
- After a single allowable minute to take care of all businesses big and small in the toilet, they jogged out of the room and continued on for five more kilometres before breakfast.
- In the evening, another minute was allowed for cold shower (they probably learned to remove their cloths and soap at the same time, then rinse and dry simultaneously), followed by a hundred pushups before bed, which must have made them sweaty. I asked him why pushups didn't come before shower. He didn't know.
- Before lights out, instead of asking God for forgiveness and favours, they chanted bedside slogan in full attention: Follow the Three People Principle; Obey Government leadership; Obliterate the Goddamned Communist bandits; Liberate Mainland compatriots. (奉行三民主义,服从政府领导,歼灭万恶共匪,解救大陆同胞) Taiwan was dreaming of reoccupying mainland China back then, and had not yet adopted even more far-fetched goals.

Military training was tough back then: Reasonable treatment was training, unreasonable treatment was tempering. (合理对待是训练,不合理对待是磨练)

'Ha ha,' Taiwan told me in his blissful poolside tone. 'Nothing like being here in Tong Fuk!'

'Glad that you're having a good time. Enjoy your stay,' I said cheekily.

'I will!' he replied sincerely.

Grrrrr!

Uncle Zhao Xing

To balance out Taiwan's holiday mood, Zhao Xing Shu — Uncle Zhao Xing — on the other side of my bed was a gloomy smiley face. He had a poignant, natural smile. At fifty-three, he looked at least ten years older. Sun and wind had gnawed deep fissures into his leathery face, the kind which only fishermen and desert dwellers have. He didn't talk much. When he did, he stammered with a strong Chaozhou accent, then chuckled wholeheartedly like a child afterwards. Unfortunately for me, he was one of the top snorers in the room, which was no small feat. When sleeping in his boat, he must have scared fish and submarines away.

Like most fishermen, he was born into being one, in the mainland. Paradoxically, as people consumed more fish than ever, making a living fishing had become increasingly difficult. To make life easier, he smuggled three black-market workers across the border in return for six thousand Hong Kong dollars, and thirty months in jail. 'Ga-a-a-ass alone cost one-un-un thousand!' he stuttered, then chuckled at the bad deal.

His family was okay. They had their own house, basic living was not a problem, though they would probably 'eat less' while he was in jail. He had a thirty-year-old daughter and three boys in their twenties. They had visited him once, which cost a few thousand bucks in travelling and accommodation. He told them not to visit again. With good behaviour, he would be out in twenty five months. He sighed, then reiterated in a self-encouraging tone: 'Own-own-only twenenty five months,' and gave a sad grin.

According to him, feeding six mouths had become extremely difficult. 'No-o-o fish ann-ann any more! Not-ot in the s-s-sea!' Another hearty chuckle. Chinese like laughing at misfortune as if it were someone else's to lighten it with defiance and distance. One's own lousy karma looks ludicrous and comical when viewed at arm's length. Plus a sea without fish is truly ridiculous to a fisherman, ridiculous enough to chuckle about.

Ah Zong

Ah Zong was the only younger inmate (in his early thirties?) whom I often chatted with in the evening. He first approached me for help with translating a letter from Chinese into English. It was a complaint letter to the police concerning the handling of his mobile phones which were still in police custody without any reason. All information had long been retrieved and he had been properly jailed. I was greatly surprised how well written (and in neat handwriting) his Chinese draft was, but he believed an English complaint would command more respect due to colonial momentum. He had a good understanding of the system.

His life story sounded fantastic in parts. If it wasn't entirely 'truthful', he had repackaged his life for self-consumption, for he had no reason to do that for me. So I listened with minimal interruption.

He was here (this was his third imprisonment) for kidnapping and illegal detention of a loser who borrowed money from Zong's loan shark client who cruised Macau's casinos. From a broken family, he grew up with his auntie and her partner who was also his Kungfu teacher. Later on, they moved to Japan with him. He couldn't speak Japanese, and was often bullied in school which was a total waste of time for him in any event. The only thing he got out of it was the will to fight to death rather than getting bullied. A few years on, he went to France and 'did all sorts of things' to make a living.

'What's all sorts of things?' I tried to seek minimal clarification.

'Oh, all sorts of fucking things,' he repeated, merely emphasising it with the expletives.

'I see.'

All sorts of things included getting shot in the chest. Luckily, he was wearing a flack vest, but 'it still hurt like hell'. He had a two-year-old son in France — consequence of one of the many fucking things he did there. In addition, he had a ten-year-old daughter who was staying with her Grandmother — Ah Zong's Mum — in Hong Kong, and two sons — five and six — who lived with their mother, his partner. A prolific young man. He talked about his kids a lot.

His smiling eyes were charming and spooky; he claimed they could see ghosts. I asked him if our dorm was haunted. To my surprise, he said he had never seen a ghost at Tong Fuk. At home, he had an antique Samurai sword passed down by his master. It hummed audibly in its sheath unless sealed with a mantra. That was the kind of stories he told, very sincerely. He said he didn't often share them but somehow sensed that I would not automatically dismiss them as poorly imagined sword and sorcery. I was touched by his perceptive trust.

His partner in Hong Kong — mother of his two sons — was a cop when they met. So was her father and a few other family members. He was surrounded by the police at home. A few years ago, she was due for promotion but Zong's brother (who had not been mentioned hitherto) got into trouble and disappeared while under surveillance. Her role in his timely escape was suspected and she lost her chance at promotion. After Zong's arrest and conviction this time, she was dismissed from the force, struggling to raise two young kids while keeping an eye on her own father whose number one wish in life was to put a bullet between Zong's ghost-seeing eyes. Yet she still came to visit him every week at Tong Fuk. Love can be mysteriously toxic to the mind.

'Alas,' said Ah Zong. 'I'm stuck. I can never leave the Policewoman, now that I owe her so much.' He called her the Policewoman.

'Why would you want to leave her?'

Why? Because his heart inexplicably belonged to another woman, his high-school sweetheart from sixteen years ago. 'Don't ask me why, but she's always been the only one in my heart. You won't understand.'

In fact I did, kind of. I had an uncanny capacity for irrationality. I didn't tell him.

He had written four letters to her since coming to Tong Fuk a couple of years ago, but she hadn't responded until a few days ago. Now that he was due for discharge in a few weeks, she replied with the news that her current relationship was not going well. *Oh dear*, I thought. For once, I nearly told him to stop. I didn't think I could handle more details of this upcoming mess. He was not the only one tormented by love though. Two other inmates had lamented to me the unbearable pain of unrequited love. I was somehow popular among broken hearted gangsters.

Apparently, Gollum wasn't a lone soul struggling with discharge anxiety. Underneath a confident and carefree facade, Zong was also greatly troubled by the prospect of imminent freedom.

'In seventeen days, I'll find out what happened to the flat I rented with three other 'watchers' who hung out in Macau casinos, and my car! And the two-year-old in France! I wonder what he looks like. And my Mum and daughter who don't keep in touch with the Policewoman or me whenever I'm jailed! And my business set up! And the boys who worked for me!'

'It'd be a whole new life,' I tried to sound positive, even excited about his to-do list.

'Yeah, I suppose. No expectations. But there'll be a lot of fucking needs.' He forced a wide grin. 'By the way, Ah Cheong, did you hear the alarm blaring all night last night?'

'No.' I hadn't heard anything at all. Didn't think anyone else had either.

If Ah Zong could indeed see and hear things ordinary people couldn't, and feel the bites of hazy heartache nobody understood, he must have felt intensely lonely and isolated. Had they been hallucinations, the result would have been the same — living through a reality shared by none. Besides struggling with uncooperative perceptions, he was also burdened by the nagging practicalities of being the father of four. Though hardly middle-age yet, he was already worrying about obsolescence in his professional circle. To younger thugs who were not qualified gangsters in Zong's eyes, his way of being a gangster was dated, not cool.

During the short decades he had been involved, gangland had fundamentally changed before his eyes, losing direction and definition. When Zong joined the Triads as a teenager, they still performed initiation rites — beheading chickens, drinking a mixture of blood from the chicken and brotherhood fingers to swear loyalty, jumping over fire and passing under swords to symbolise the deadly consequence of betrayal. He studied harder than ever to memorise identification poems and secret hand signals passed down from Qing dynasty revolutionary cum mobster hybrids. He had felt the power of ritual and tradition in his spirit, transforming him into a Triad, a real one who treasured righteousness and loyalty above rationality, with pride. Then came the iPhone. In Zong's final analysis, Steve Jobs had unwittingly undermined the integrity of the Triads. 'It has corrupted their minds,' he scanned the spectres of young inmates with ghost-seeing eyes.

'They don't give a shit about initiation ceremonies no more,' Zong was palpably disgusted. I wanted to put a hand on his shoulder to calm him. 'Instead of beheading live chicken, they cut hardboiled egg — a hard-boiled-fucking-egg! — shell dyed red, then eat it to avow loyalty. Instead of drawing blood with a knife, they draw a red line across the palm with a felt-pen. That fucking farce started during the bird flu.'

'Virtual blood oath?' I was amused, secretly admiring its cleverness.

Zong puckered his lips and nodded contemptuously in reply.

Loyalty had not only disappeared, but become derisible according to Zong the young traditionalist. It was now common for buddies from different gangs to get together to do a job, then disband. Though still separated according to gang affiliation in Tong Fuk's dining hall, betrayal of fellow gang bros had become common, no big deal, even kind of cool.

'Imagine! Gang no longer means anything to gangsters!'

I wasn't as surprised as Zong though. Irony's everywhere these days — sharp but unnoticed. Why would gangland be different?

In English, gangsters are also known as tough guys. In Cantonese, Triads call themselves Gu Wark Zai — literally Tricky Guys. Some are tough and stupid too, but they like to pride themselves for being Gu Wark — tricky and cunning — rather than tough. Ah Wah, a jailmate who inspired my story Midlife Triad had committed manslaughter when a teenager. He once tried to impress the youngsters with his experience from the kiddie slammer. He told them how they could cause trouble and tilt the power balance with the guards if they would act as one, with unity, solidarity, you know.

A toothless youngster's reply was: 'Wah Suk, of course we fucking know. You think we're fucking dumb? To stir up shit is easy. But what for? Is the reward worth the fucking risk and trouble? Must fucking calculate lah, Wah Suk.'

The toothless kid was right. Ah Wah smiled his defeat and returned to the kung fu classic novel he had read a hundred times.

Spare Tooth

Most young inmates weren't very friendly with older cons like myself. Perhaps they discriminated against age, though a few of them were toothless from ice indulgence, and were looking geriatric precociously. Not having to pretend friendliness to people I had nothing in common with wasn't too difficult, but a few young thugs were particularly obnoxious. My initial smiley gestures were not only empathetically ignored, but sneered at. *Hey man, what did I do wrong?* Naturally, I disliked them in reciprocity, albeit discretely, until I had a glimpse of another side hidden behind their abominable surface.

Spare Tooth was one of the worst. His mouth was a black hole with two front teeth and a tongue. Nothing else. He was miniature, about two heads shorter than me. To compensate for a lack of stature, he tried to look fierce and mean to us old guys, but was loud and goofy in the company of his peers; they might have smacked his two teeth off otherwise. His menacing stares had minimal effect on me, however, as his eyes were too far from mine due to height difference.

One night, after the lights dimmed, I noticed him chatting like an adult with an illegal worker, a northerner in his late forties. He was recounting his life to the mainlander in Putonghua. What a surprise. What water had he been drinking? I had no idea what started that uncanny conversation but was immediately insomniac with curiosity behind my eye towel, ears on full alert.

His father was a delivery man for Broadway (a camera and gadget chain) who regularly worked fourteen hours per day to make sixteen thousand per month. Spare Tooth was the oldest of three boys. He said he joined the Triads for only one reason — money. For that, his father was very upset with him, but he netted sixty to seventy thousand per month on average, tax free, four times the old man's income, and overtook him to become the main bread earner. He didn't give further details of his job, but emphasised authoritatively that he *violently* opposed his younger brothers to follow his lucrative example, or getting anywhere near his circle of bad guys.

'Oh well, the older one visits me once every couple of months. The younger one hasn't shown up for two years.'

'What about your father,' asked the northerner.

'He came in February, after Chinese New Year, the year before.'

After that late night eavesdropping, I stopped despising him. I found him pitiable, even secretly likeable, and kept a greater distance.

Gulu

Gulu was no more than a hair-width taller than Spare Tooth, but much stronger on a per kilo basis. Poor nutrition might have been responsible for their truncated presence. He was in for mugging. To be a passable robber, one needs a bit of brawn, and preferably a scary face. Gulu had both. Obviously into gymnastics more than drugs, he could do a few dozen sit ups on his side in bed. Unlike Spare Tooth, he looked more intimidating than comical with all his canine-looking teeth intact, and a severely upturned nose which made him appear above you when you look at him from above. Like Spare Tooth, he loved attention, and talked a lot at the top of his coarse voice. For a while, he was my neighbour. After a few greeting attempts ended up making him turn his nose even further up, I stopped trying, and we coexisted in silent mutual contempt.

It was also late at night. He was talking sensibly with another youngster. What is it about late hours that makes people spill their guts, I wondered. These daytime werewolves somehow transmuted into melancholy little boys when normal prisoners slept. Gulu was telling his buddy in an oddly tender and innocent voice how much his sister and brother-in-law spoiled him. Coming from a twenty-year-old robber, it sounded unreal and nauseating. His brother-in-law even bought him a twenty-thousand-dollar scooter, and he went on to describe its lovely features in detail. I thought everyone detests an ugly, mean, and underdeveloped thug like him. I was wrong. His sister and brother-in-law loved him.

I was probably in an emotional state myself. Perhaps Venus was overshadowing Mars. I nearly wept under my eye towel when he described his scooter, then nearly laughed out loud when I realised how ridiculous I was being.

The following morning, I got up slightly before dawn as usual, and jotted down whatever I could recall about the conversation. I associated Gulu with an utterly incompatible word — compassion. He actually made me think about compassion. I understood in theory that even someone as loathsome as Gulu had a good side. That's why we should never judge anyone too harshly. Well, principles are easy to appreciate, but hard to put into practice. Plus real arseholes

usually hide their theoretical good side extremely well. If not for Tong Fuk, I would not have had the opportunity to find out anything remotely pleasant about someone like Gulu.

Xiao Long

Xiao Long — Little Dragon — was a remarkable exception. Like most of his peers, the handsome young man was not tall, but well built. He had a lowkey authority, but was definitely not a populist. He seemed aloof, even asocial, to his fellow gang members, but was somehow popularly elected head of the *Sun Yee On* Triad conglomerate at Tong Fuk. During playground time, he read by himself at a quiet corner and stayed away from team sports. He was the polite and helpful young man who told me on my first day at Workshop Five to just let him know if I ran out of toilet paper.

He was in for drug trafficking, which landed him seven years, initially at Shek Pik. He had served nearly two-thirds of that by the time we met, and was due for imminent discharge, hence his transfer to Tong Fuk Lower Circle. Unlike other young inmates, he realised that he was young enough to start afresh, but not young enough to go through this process again. During playground time, he studied English. He knew it was not going to be easy to face whatever awaited him out there. Self-education was hard; trying to gain trust and recognition by the system was much harder. He told me he planned to stay away from everyone he knew when he got out. I wholeheartedly wished him success. But I also knew that leaving the past behind takes more than a good plan. Had I believed in prayers, I would have prayed for him.

Ah Wah

Ah Wah came to Dorm L1 about a week or two after me, and settled in the bed across the aisle from mine. At first, he didn't talk much. Most evenings, he would read Jin Yong's kung fu classic *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* in bed. It took more than a week before we introduced ourselves, after his victory in a spontaneous arm wrestle tournament.

The kids were arm wrestling that night, making a lot of noise. In a burst of good spirit, Ah Wah left his Condor Heroes to join the the tournament, declaring he would down any challenger before they could count to ten. One condition — left arm only. The audacious challenge caused an uproar. He eventually beat all the tough guys in Hong Kong before they could count to three, which in a way reflected the physical state of the next generation of local Triads.

Appearing more stringy than muscular, Ah Wah didn't look particularly strong, but could drop to the floor from standing, body straight like a plank, into rapid push-ups. He was also a great chess player. He acquired these useless skills for survival reasons during two successive three-year stints in the juvenile institution at Cape Collinson — aka TC among convicts, none of whom knew what it stands for. According to him, one needs to be resourceful and extremely tough in juvenile jail. Otherwise, life could be unthinkably hard.

When Ah Wah first went to TC in the 1980s, he was about fifteen, an up-and-coming warrior class member for the Number Gang, called 14K back then. On behalf of his gang, he killed a rival by accident, and ended up in the kiddie slammer.

He was discharged three years later. One month hence, he got sucked into another gang warfare, and returned to TC for another three years. He had not killed anyone this time but the jail term was the same. He turned twenty-one in TC but was not transferred to an adult prison. He was due for discharge in only a few weeks.

Since then, he had managed to avoid jail, until now. This time, he was in for sham marriages because he needed the money to get married for real. When I knew him better, I asked him what he was doing for a living these days. He gave me his typically sincere and evasive reply: 'All sorts of things. Difficult. What's there to do in Hong Kong?'

Ah Wah evidently suffered from a classic case of midlife crisis in terms of career. He lamented the rapid loss of traditions in gangland. Things were changing for change's sake. Having been a gangster nearly all his life, that had robbed him of his bearings in society.

Even coming back to jail — a familiar institution where he had spent his formative years — presented a dilemma. Being an old jailbird and long-time Triad without any firsthand knowledge of the grownup slammers of the 21st century was slightly embarrassing. Prisons had changed since he was a boy, he was sure, but wasn't sure in what way. What he had heard from pals who had been regulars to the pokey all sounded like boastful crap. Due to the long break and the non-violent nature of his offence, he was now treated as a 'white hand'. While feeling relieved to be among Category B and C smalltime crooks rather than hardcore As, he felt somewhat downgraded, therefore the urge to remind the kids that he wasn't an amateur.

In characteristically halting style, he told me many incomplete stories about himself and the underworld.

Stan and Ringo

With my opinion of the judiciary at an all time low when I arrived at Tong Fuk, I expected to find a prison full of innocent victims of wrongful conviction — at least in their own minds. I eventually collected enough anecdotes to come up with a reasonable estimate which refuted my presupposition. To the best of my judgement, most of the *See Hings* were technically guilty as charged. Whether imprisonment was a fair and appropriate penalty for smuggling cigarettes, or ghostwriting an exam, or marrying for money (something which celebrities do legally and repeatedly all the time, albeit in series rather than in parallel) was another question. Every criminal since the eternally unforgivable apple theft in the Garden of Eden has a valid reason for having sinned. Unfortunately, indiscriminate leniency is not always a practical solution.

Stan and Ringo were exceptions. Having interviewed them in detail, I became quite convinced that they were sitting in Flower Lounge mainly due to bad luck exacerbated by other's ignorance and perhaps prejudice. In fact, based on decades of business experience, I found Stanley's conviction rather incredible.

The fact that both of them were convicted *small* commercial criminals is indicative rather than coincidental; the business world is an alien territory to a typical magistrate. I've emphasised small because big corporate crimes are a different game played according to substantially different interpretation and manipulation of the same rules.

The average judge is as detached from commercial reality as celibate priests were from marital tribulations. But just as Catholic clergies were deemed qualified arbiters of family squabbles in the earthly Kingdom of God, judges inexperienced in business operation are empowered to try mercantile disputes in modern times.

During my trial, the magistrate specifically mentioned in presenting his verdict that he found the relevant board meeting minutes we submitted 'suspicious' because some wordings were identical to the pre-meeting papers. He insinuated that they had been doctored. His Honour evidently didn't know that managers write background reports to set the meeting agenda, then use the files as templates when preparing the minutes. That has been the way people do things since the invention of word-processors with cut-and-paste function. I myself would have suspected anyone who wrote Board Minutes from scratch dubiously stupid. But I was not in a position to comment or query His Honour's baffling viewpoint which, according to himself, had influenced judgement.

All humans have limited knowledge and exposure. In theory, unworldly judges can be backed by expert witnesses. But that doesn't happen very often in reality. Plus having seen how shockingly little my honourable judge knew about basic articles such as Minutes of Board Meetings, I cannot comfortably assume that he had the necessary capacity to grasp specialist opinions on subjects he didn't have sufficient background.

My opinion above is based on common sense, not disrespect.

To give an illustrative parallel, although I have received postgraduate level trainings in science, I cannot responsibly decide whether a person should undergo brain surgery based on a consultative conference with experts. Furthermore, expert witnesses are not necessarily classroom teachers, and judges are not students. It's understandable that they don't wish to ask too many detail questions, lest they appear unlearned in a theatre where he's known as the 'learned judge'. At some point, they will have to just nod wisely to let things proceed. Nobody can test their understanding on the matter anyway. Under Separation of Power, they are practically challenge-proof.

Hong Kong has inherited the Separation of Power from its colonial days. The quaint concept might have once worked in eighteenth century Britain, when anyone who spoke with a proper accent had natural authority over illiterate peasants with simple desires and grievances. In today's complex world, it can be an absurd incongruity at best, a hindrance to justice at worst. But the archaic principle stands nonetheless, sanctified by inertia, defying the passage of time, disregarding common sense.

Besides detachment from common and legitimate practices in the real business world, the legal actors' mentality is generally antithetical to that of mercantile folks. Commercial enterprises, even hopelessly bureaucratic ones, regularly take calculated risks, make speculative judgements involving multiple unknowns and variables. Magistrates, on the other hand, interpret right and wrong with an absolute scale based on set procedures, permitting no extraneous interference. Though often arbitrary in practice, the law is in theory righteously rigid. A stern and objective approach supposedly makes the legal process fair. Ignorance of practical nuances, it has been claimed, renders judgement 'impartial'. The entrepreneurial spirit

and the legal mind do not overlap easily due to profound cultural differences, even if the underlying intention and moral principles are aligned.

The misfortunes which befell Stan and Ringo were shattering to them, but far from sensational to onlookers. Similar disasters could happen to any small business operator. All it takes is bad luck, which is always lurking somewhere nearby.

Stanley was in his mid-forties when I met him. We shared a dining table, so sat around doing our own things and watching each other a lot. He ceremoniously cleaned his plate every meal, picking up the very last grain of rice and chewing mindfully with mouth closed, which wasn't common practice in Tong Fuk. He was quiet and aloof at first. When I got to know him better, he loved to talk about music, from Mozart to Led Zeppelin. He appeared to be a keenly responsible father of two boys whom he regretted not being able to hover over their development due to imprisonment. I was most impressed by his excellent language skills in Chinese and English, something which had declined alarmingly among middle-aged professionals in Hong Kong. Gradually, after taking his time to warm up, he told me his story. Though he was merely an extra in the saga, the trial was reasonably publicised at the time and made perpetually Googleable.

He has two university degrees from Canada, and had worked five years as a project manager for a publicly listed company when a steamy load of metaphoric manure fatefully collided with the fabled fan and got flung his way. The chairman and founder, a conventional crook with limited imagination, had set up a horde of phantom firms owned by his wife, sister, father — the whole clan — to supply services and equipments to the company at enviable margins. The threadbare scam was exposed in no time. Everyone was duly arrested and subjected to the full force of the law. The chairman's clan was summarily jailed. Justice had been served. Unfortunately, Stanley, the project coordinator without the authority to specify equipment, or issue purchase orders, or sign cheques — a common arrangement in most companies — became the only non-family member convicted. The English judge, a conviction-record-holder, opined that a project manager, given the grand title, must surely have known everything, which is very far from the general truth. In addition, he seemed convinced that Stan, who shared the surname Yip — a homophone of karma — with the chairman (as well as more than seven million other Chinese), must have been somehow related. Perhaps it was karma after all.

In my opinion, it would have been truly incredible if Chairman Crook had indeed let on his corrupt scheme to a relatively new employee. It wouldn't take much IQ to see that Stan's participation would have been an unnecessary risk, adding neither advantage nor convenience to the chairman's shady manoeuvres. But that's only my personal opinion, not necessarily common sense to those who are unfamiliar with how companies operate, and too unadulterated to get into the mindset of unimaginative criminals.

Anyway, Stan got six years and a ruined career. Meanwhile, his wife held the fort, raising two boys alone, visiting him in Lantau twice per month. Given a choice, I would have preferred to be in his situation rather than his wife's.

In the workshop, Stan always finished his work properly, as quickly as possible, in order to read and relax at his quiet corner. Unlike me, he wasn't curious about our fellow inmates. He didn't like convicts even though he was one himself. He kept to himself most of the time. I was one of a few cons whom he socialised with, cautiously at first. His other acquaintance was Xiao Long.

Ringo's case was similarly straight forward. Real life commercial crimes are usually not very intriguing.

He was an IT/accounting professional with his own small software house in partnership with a friend (let's call him Partner Friend). Partner Friend was serving concurrently in another jailhouse, also for 'Proceed of Indictable Offence'. Ringo and his wife were devout Christians. A close church and family friend of theirs for over twenty years worked as a freelance salesperson for Ringo, bringing in contracts once in a while for a cut. In 2007, he told Ringo he had an opportunity and needed a formal business entity to process some Letters of Credit. Since he knew Ringo had a dormant project company — many companies large and small do in Hong Kong — he asked if he could borrow it for this contract. How could Ringo say no? He was asked to receive — not issue — some Letters of Credit on behalf of his good friend, involving no monetary exposure. They saw each other at work and in church a few times a week, sang the same hymns to the same God for more than two decades. Their wives were besties. Their kids grew up together. The families even vacationed overseas together. Such trivial favours between small enterprises are common anyway. Having observed Ringo everyday for months, I couldn't picture him saying no under the circumstances.

Ringo was a nice guy, a bit nerdy as IT pros tend to be, intelligent but not always fully alert. Through his wife, he had delegated most things in life to God. I normally would have found such a degree of piety suspicious, but we were jailmates. I had plenty of casual opportunities to discover his good nature on and off the sewing machine, and at the dining table.

It turned out that his brother in faith was the reincarnate of the Devil Himself.

He had opened a company with accomplices whom Ringo did not know. They fabricated scam business contracts and issued Letters of Credit to Ringo's dormant company. When these Letters of Credit from the HSBC arrived, Ringo would cash them in, then write out a cheque to Brother Devil & Co. In his position, I would have deducted a handling fee, which would have been fair and expected. Ringo said he didn't, which I found unreasonable. But they were fellow soldiers of Christ, more than just business associates.

That went on for eight months. Eventually, backed by this favourable track record, Brother Devil & Co. obtained a two-million facility from the HSBC. Soon afterwards, Brother Devil vanished after taking out a second mortgage on the apartment he shared with his wife and kids. He took every penny, and didn't bother to leave a goodbye note or nice prayer for his children, telling them to be good, study hard, follow the path of God, and that Daddy is very sorry but would be thinking of them whenever he remembers, and that they would understand one day. Until then, a thousand hugs and kisses, see you back in Hell one day, et cetera. No, no fuss. He

puffed off without a plume. There were unverified reports by friends who claimed to have subsequently spotted him with a voluptuous woman in the mainland, looking plump and happy.

After Brother Devil disappeared, the HSBC suspected internal misconduct and reported the matter to the ICAC. Nothing untoward was discovered within the bank, but Brother Devil's four accomplices as well as Ringo and Partner Friend were charged. The accomplices readily pleaded guilty, and testified that they had never met Ringo and Partner Friend, or knew about their involvement. The magistrate — another conviction-happy magistrate better known in the circle as Stanley Express, an allusion to one of Hong Kong's oldest and toughest penitentiaries Stanley Prison — reputably hated all criminals real or imagined with a passion. On Day Two of a 27-day trial, the learned judge commented that he found it unbelievable that Ringo and Partner Friend did not know about what their associate was up to. The remaining twenty-five hearings were apparently mere formality. At the end of it, he sent everyone to jail.

When I was in Tong Fuk, Ringo was planning to appeal, but had run out of money. His business had gone bankrupt during the trial. Most unusually, his lawyer had helped him with the appeal submission pro bono. The Appeal Court subsequently admitted the case for hearing — a strong indication that Ringo had substantial legal grounds indeed. But he will have to rely on Legal Aid in the formidable journey ahead. Meanwhile, his wife's church friends opined that appealing was against God's will, as the Heavenly Father had already gone through the trouble of arranging Ringo's incarceration. On my last exchange with Ringo on the subject, his wife had decided to pray overtime for a definitive sign from above before finally deciding on the matter, as the deadline approached.

To middle-aged professionals like Stan and Ringo, the repercussions of a criminal record is profound. Because of the lawsuit, Ringo went bankrupt in 2009. His accountant license — his fallback means to make a living — was revoked. The punishment, irrespective of whether justice had been served, was substantially harsher than official calculation.

Stanley was also nearly bankrupted by the legal process. In Tong Fuk, he filed his own appeal unrepresented. The paperwork was daunting, but legal counsel was unaffordable, and he was a pro with paperwork. On judgement day, after spending the previous night at Lai Chi Kok, he noosed a tie over a wrinkly shirt and went to the Court of Appeal in a caged van. The judge did not show up. A clerk, an old woman, dawdled over to the dock and inserted a big brown envelop through the bars. 'Not approved,' she said, then turned to leave.

The written rejection was curt and perfunctory according to Stan. He took the documents with cuffed hands and returned to LCK. The following day, he was shipped back to Tong Fuk. One way to kill time, I suppose.

* * *

God and Triads



Useful for picking teeth. The box can be used to keep ointment etc.

It's almost six, in a typical Hong Kong office.

According to their employment contracts, the work day had ended nearly an hour ago. It is also duly stipulated therein that overtime work is voluntary. No compensation whatsoever. They are volunteers. Yet they dawdle, bound to their chairs by latent pressure, shifting, breathing impatiently, eyes flicking across spreadsheets, looking out for erroneous inputs responsible for the imbalance. There must be a non-mathematical reason why things don't add up.

The manager checks one piece of paper against another, a few strands of hair stubbornly greased onto his forehead. They've been there all day, perhaps all week. It's always too late to wash hair by the time he gets home. Sleeping with wet hair gives him a headache, and blowdrying threatens the integrity of the hundred or so surviving strands. Every strand counts. Maybe this Sunday.

The new guy sighs audibly — issuing a social statement with carbon dioxide. He turns his machine off with the abrupt determination which verges on violence, and gets up. The dusty monitor goes dark. Relieved. Worried.

'See you morrow,' he mumbles to no one in particular, avoiding the manager's direction.

Nobody responds.

Good for you kiddo. Don't have a mortgage, do you?

The manager looks up briefly as the new guy disappears through the door, then returns to his papers impassively, making rustling noises. He doesn't seem to mind. But is he making mental notes in red? Time slips by silently, then sneaks back to where it started, winding itself tighter and tighter around the office, squeezing for productivity...

There wasn't any such suspenseful moment in Workshop Five. When a day is done, a day is done.

At the end of work hours, somewhat arbitrarily marked by an officer hollering *hand in your tools*, we screeched to a halt, dropping everything on hand as if it had suddenly caught fire. A half-cut thread would be left dangling on fifty percent of its cross-section until tomorrow, unless tomorrow was Sunday or a statutory holiday. We grabbed our mugs and bags to get searched as we filed through the exit. Nothing from the workshop was allowed to get out. We then trudged phlegmatically towards the playground as a matter of style, not because we were exhausted from a hard day's work.

The field was surrounded by trees, hillsides, distant beaches, and fences. A few lumps of cloud drifted into perfect positions as if assigned by a photographer. *Beautiful Tong Fuk!* could have been a fitting bumper sticker for the department's prison vans.

The area immediately left of the entrance was covered. Two television sets hung from a corrugated steel roof. Straight ahead, past the covered area, was a small concrete football pitch. To its left, at the far end, was a raised platform with two pingpong tables, a snooker-like old game *Hong Lok Chess*, and an entropic heap of flimsy canvas shoes — never washed or cleaned or aired out to shock the fungus — for footballers and joggers who found slippers unsuitable for sporting activities. Between the platform and the TV canopy was a stretch of nearly vertical rocky slope lined with barbwire coils at the bottom twenty metres or so. To the right and far end of the football pitch were multiple layers of tall chicken wire fences. Beyond the far end lied the Tong Fuk Beach — mostly just sand and salty water, always silent from this distance.

In the midst of this bucolic setting were a few inmates who opted to continue sitting on hard benches, captivated by the flickering images on TV charging and yelling at maximum volume. During weekdays, Japanese robots with blond hair and green eyes would combat Japanese robots with green hair and blond eyes. On weekends, some other children shows would be on. Children programmes seemed to have been dumbed down even further since my childhood. Either I had grown smarter, or evolution had moved in reverse.

Youngsters kicked football or smashed pingpong balls, laughing and swearing. Older inmates strolled or jogged around their game, often in twos and threes. Occasionally, I would also stroll the perimeter with a fellow inmate, listening to his story as I watched the game. The young thugs were actually quite good footballers; not many amateurs got to practise daily like they did.

Most of the time, I did *Zharm Zhong* — a form of static martial arts, or stand-up meditation, depending on the practitioner's intention, state of mind, or age — or a few yoga asanas near the entrance, on the other side of the televised monsters. Dozens of footballs were trapped between fences, many had deflated and turned greenish. Since prisoners were not allowed to climb fences, and retrieving footballs was not in the jail guards' job descriptions, these out-of-bound balls, though only metres away, were lost forever. When doing *Zharm Zhong*, I would pick one for visual focus, pretending I was Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, and it was Wilson. Oftentimes, my mind would stray to the meaning of life, fate, justice, freedom — deep stuff like that. When imprisoned, philosophical reveries are common, even obligatory.

I will never understand why the guards seemed to prefer the smokey and noisy Common Room to the scenic open field. Whenever there was a slight hint of imperfect weather, they

would cancel playground arbitrarily, something which was within their power, and kept everyone indoors to watch TV or re-read the Apple Daily. Gollum would search for redemptive verses in the Bible.

Though Gollum was the only one who scrutinised the Bible everyday, religious studies was popular. Besides offering a spiritual sedative for heathen souls in a vulnerable moment, Bible studies also coincided with work hours. To my criminal mind, the arrangement smells of bribery, as Bible thumping is less labour intensive than sewing.

In addition, religious studies offered another form of tacit advantage.

A few experienced and kindhearted *See Hings* had told me that Bible hours were conducive to parole approval. It was not an official criterion, but old cons knew how things worked. 'Not that fucking bad man if you ever apply for Scheme A (a parole programme). No work once a week, and they dole out candies.' Candies? Now, that's bribery beyond doubt.

Though a convicted briber, I refused to be bribed. Plus I worried that my heretic tongue would lose control in a Bible discussion class. Attacking pious volunteers with offensive sarcasm risked jeopardising my pristine prison records and my chance for parole in the remote future. I preferred the sewing machine.

I did request to join the Triads, however, but was rejected on grounds of age and education by God-uncle Tseng.

Uncle Tseng, in his early sixties, was probably the most senior in Workshop Five in terms of age and gangstership. He had a huge potbelly, and the air of seniority around his person. For some reason — probably age — he liked me. He invited me for a stroll every now and then, telling me bits and pieces about his world in heavy Chiu Chow accent. 'If any of them thugs bullies you, let me know,' he told me when we first talked, after he offered me a piece of chocolate.

'No no no. They're all quite nice.' I assured him emphatically, truly grateful for the offer and the chocolate. In Tong Fuk, a piece of chocolate was a big deal.

He was functionally illiterate, the only adult I'd ever met who didn't know the English alphabets. When he was transferred from Dorm L2 to E1, he told me that his new dorm started with the English letter which looked like a shelf, and drew it out for me on his palm.

His prisoner number (which stayed with the individual for life) was five-digit long. Mine had six, an order of magnitude behind. Based on that, I estimated his first incarceration to be in the early 1980s, perhaps even the late 70s. Most of the inmates and many of the guards were not even born when Uncle Tseng first went to jail. It was not something that he bragged about — in fact he was mostly jolly, not boastful — but an impressive record such as that commanded more respect than fifteen PhD degrees in Tong Fuk. This time, he was in for drug related charges after having delegated imprisonment to younger colleagues for a long time. According to him, his 'stupid chick' kept too much ice at home and got busted. To save her ass, he took the blame. The kind of things old men did for young women. One could follow up that anecdote with many questions, but I asked none.

I once asked him jokingly what bad things he did decades ago to end up in jail though. He replied with a childlike giggle that it was a 'misunderstanding.' Well, that much was obvious. Misunderstanding of one form or another was the overwhelming reason why people ended up behind the fences surrounding us.

Time wore on with undefinable Tong Fuk characteristics. Many days had felt like years when they crept through and dragged me along in suspended animation. But in retrospect, they were a mere blink of the eye.

More than a month had vanished without a trace. Easter had arrived. I was starting to get used to being a con, feeling comfortable in slippers all day. To commemorate Jesus' death, we had the day off. If I were God's son, I would be puzzled, perhaps offended. Look, Easter was one of the worst bloody days in my life. I was tortured inside out by psychopathic soldier boys since breakfast, and ended up on the cross by sunset, big long rusty nails through wrists and feet. It's a day I would rather forget. Yet, you people who claim to love me are celebrating it with a long holiday! Restaurants are offering set menus with glossy skin roasted turkeys, and lots of wine. Kids are running around hunting eggs, screaming and laughing. And is it that difficult to imagine that the crucifixes dangling from your necks give me the creeps and make the Devil chuckle? Seriously, though I'm genetically all-knowing, I have a hard time understanding your intentions.

Anyway, I was a prisoner, not the son of God. We had the day off to celebrate. I had only just started my *Zharm Zhong* in the playground when the guards ordered assembly. What? There should have been a full hour left, and the weather was cloudlessly perfect. Temperature was felicitously within the two-degree range Hong Kong folks found liveable. Japanese robots had only just started a new round of roaring combat. Their audience will never find out who won if we depart at this juncture!

Oh well, orders were orders.

We marched to the landing area at the bottom of the access stairways, and settled on the semicircular amphitheatre like children, scratching, chatting, wondering, picking noses. Wouldn't it be great if they staged a public replay of the fat rat in a plastic bag surrounded by cats to simulate Jesus' suffering? Plenty of cats milled about. After a few minutes of aimless anticipation, three jovial characters bounced onto the middle, guitars slung over shoulders.

Abruptly, without any introduction, they burst into a chorus of hallelujah.

After the opening jingle, the leader introduced themselves as Christians. Oh what a surprise. Him and his brothers and sisters were happy to share this special day with us, he declared. Preferring my playground meditation over a concert by atrocious singers, I honestly could not reciprocate the feeling. He then continued with a story: He once watched a very touching American movie. A professor collaborated with a suicidal girl to make her death appear to be a murder committed by him. He then got hanged. End of story. What? Wait, be patient, there's a moral to the story, our preacher said with a grin. The professor had done that on purpose to demonstrate in no uncertain term that capital punishment could be mistaken. Hmm...something to muse over in the next three years, I supposed.

Our peculiar raconteur allowed an awkwardly long moment of befuddlement before revealing a far deeper message. 'But, dear imprisoned friends —' his endearing address for us god-forsaken cons '— the professor's sacrifice was nothing, *nothing at all!* compared to the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf.' He beamed and ran his fingers through his hair as if to check whether a warm halo had appeared. He then bowed and exited without further ado.

Nobody applauded. I was slightly embarrassed by our blunt honesty. At the same time, I quickly ran through his mind-boggling story, trying to remember his every word for my notebook later. Would anyone not present believe what he had just said?

Unbelievably...

Another gentleman hopped onto the performance area. This lot seemed bouncier than normal people. He had a testimony to share: Not too long ago, he confessed, he was a bad guy. *Very bad*, he emphasised darkly. He was slightly better than the first guy in building up his story. 'You guys are nowhere near as bad as I was!' Really? A little presumptuous and insensitive, perhaps? 'How bad?' he continued rhetorically. 'I wanted to burn down a church. Just burn it down! For absolutely no reason! Imagine!' He opened his arms with spread finger to invite imagination. That sounded like straight forward insanity, a case study for psychiatry rather than comparative immorality, I thought.

'Then!' he startled me out of my musing. 'I heard Jesus. I heard him, and that changed my mind. I became a changed person — a good guy — ever since. I no longer want to burn any church.'

I prayed silently: Dear God, I need a urine test right now for hallucinogens, together with this gentleman. I wondered what Jesus said to him. Did He speak Aramaic, or Cantonese? I would never have the chance to ask such a pertinent question. I let my curiosity pass.

After relaying his mystical experience, he broke into a song about how Jesus saves potential sinners from committing dumb crimes such as arbitrary arson.

Though entertaining, playground hour felt longer than usual, with no end in sight. I needed a moment of silence to think about the surreality hopping and singing before my very eyes.

Abruptly, he was done singing. Yet another very happy person hopped up and took over the mic. He began with a question: 'Now, dear imprisoned friends —' Their *nows* and condescending *dear imprisoned friends* was starting to irritate me greatly. '— today's Easter, right?'

Another befuddled murmur from the audience. Though non-responsive, I was surprised to note how diplomatic the boys were. Someone muttered *what the fuck* under his breath, but that was it.

'Now —' stop your fucking *now* now, for Chrissakes! '— Easter is a festival related to Jesus, right?' He raised his pitch to express rhetorical anxiety.

Another murmuring from the audience. Someone mumbled 'Just give us the fucking candies' this time.

'Now, do you know which other annual festival is about Jesus Christ?'

No response. Just a few yawns.

'Now...' he repeated the question.

'Ghost Festival!' someone yelled.

Ha ha! That's funny. Oh no! Oh my God! It was me!

I could feel the facetious words reverberating on my lips. No, it wasn't me, honest to God. I was evidently possessed. Not my fault. Do you do exorcism by the way, Sir?

A guard gave me a *you-naughty-old-man* look. I smiled apologetically, about to sweat. Is he going to send me to the *Water Rice Cell* for solidarity detox?

My reckless reply triggered an uproar and a plethora of answers.

'Mid-Autumn Festival!'

'Dragon Boat Festival!'

'Film Festival!'

Way to go, boys! I like thugs. They got my joke and shared my appreciation of the absurd. If that had just happened in a corporate conference, my pointlessly educated colleagues would have been dead silent, wondering if I was stupid or something, until some up-and-coming smart arse volunteered a correction: 'James, it's Christmas!'

Uncle Tseng was laughing his head off right behind me. I turned to ask him: 'Uncle Tseng. Don't think I'm fit for the church. Can I join your gang instead? Will you take me?'

'Are you fucking kidding? You're too fucking old and have studied too fucking much. *No!*' My membership application was instantly, categorically, rejected by the jolly Godfather.

'Hey, be quiet!' shouted Ah Sir, giving me another dirty glance. I lowered my head and pretended to pray.

The preacher wasn't offended though. He seemed to have missed the prank altogether, shaking his head wisely, feeling sorry for us ignorant jail birds. He patiently explained in a feminine voice — some peculiar men liked to raise the pitch of their voice to convey love, kindness, and condescendence, especially to kids — that the other festival was Christmas.

Voila! A few thugs slapped their foreheads audibly in revelation.

Music resumed. I glanced at the guard. He seemed to have forgotten me. Our visitors made us listen to a few more songs before handing us each a form to fill. 'Just tick, and you can have your candies, ha ha.' He was very pleased with his distasteful temptation — you're now within reach of you candies, ha ha. Oh Lord, lead us not into temptation, especially not from such a jerk. Perhaps my thuggish jailmate would be offended and beat the bejesus out of him? Unfortunately, they didn't normally mind bad manners. Oh well, when in prison, do what prisoners do. Though I didn't like candies, I was determined to behave, in repentance of my earlier disrespect.

First things first, we had to tick some boxes. The choices were trickily identical, mere subtle shifts in diction without changing the meaning. They probably presumed that lowly educated cons wouldn't notice:

(1) I've decided to repent and start believing in Jesus.

- (2)I renew my determination to believe in Jesus.
- (3)I'm willing to participate in Religious Classes or be visited. Etc.

Whichever we chose, we would be snared for redemption.

I slipped mine into my pocket, saving it for the notebook and future evidence. One day, if I write about this, I thought with great foresight, I'll need something to assure myself that this Easter event, surreal as it may appear in future recollection, actually happened.

I didn't have many religious acquaintances. The few I knew were quite normal but for their simpleminded answers to everyday mysteries such as *why we exist*. In fact, nobody I knew, pious or not, educated or not, was remotely this queer. I wondered why. Perhaps normal preachers who hollered hallelujah strategically with purpose and demands were too cynical to play this game with infinitely more cynical convicts? Seriously, these ones right there should see a doctor. Perhaps they had, and been prescribed prisoners to help them discover self-esteem? The slammer was a good inconsequential place for the thickest crackpot believers to play soulsavers, to feel holy and ecstatic.

Meanwhile, the repented arsonist was holding a guitar at the fringe, looking up, smiling to the awning above us.

After a few more rounds of teasing, we were doled out Coca Cola candies. I didn't know they existed. As soon as we returned to the dining hall, inmates were trading them for cigarettes and other usual goodies. Conversion rates for the god-sent tidbits were instantly established by market force. I tried a cola candy out of curiosity, shivered, then gave the rest away, hoping generosity would get me some redemption credits in return.

I might have seemed ungracious to the people who had kindly brought us empty calories flavoured like a recently emptied coke bottle, but something wasn't quite right with the well-intentioned arrangement. Most inmates did need spiritual support, guidance, and enrichment. In their eyes, fate had been selectively brutal to them. Sure, they were far from perfect, but so was everyone else. Why them, therefore? Why always them? Unfortunately, instead of showing a way out of this dead-end mentality, the bouncing storytellers might have deepened their confusion and cynicism.

Christian volunteers dominated prison visits mainly because of a tradition inherited from the past. The apparent popularity of official Bible studies behind bars was largely due to an established perception among prisoners that the system favoured those who pretended to enjoy thumping through God's words when it came to parole assessment. Knowing the *See Hings* a little now, I believe Buddhism and Daoism could play a more meaningful role in the prison environment. Most local convicts would find it easier to absorb and digest these indigenous wisdoms and attain spiritual alleviation, if not exactly enlightenment or redemption. I once overheard a few young inmates sharing their meditation experience in the playground. They were learning it together from a library book. Their totally unexpected efforts piqued my own

interest. Soon after Tong Fuk, I started to meditate out of curiosity, and have kept up the daily practice until now. It's been more than ten years.

* * *

Flower Lounge Book Club



Filled three notebooks made with future technology

Prisons are penitentiaries run by the Correctional Services Department to lock up law breakers. The name of the responsible department suggests an intention to reeducate and correct, not just administer punitive measures. While incarceration is relatively straight forward, correction is not, especially when the root causes of criminality remain unresolved. Furthermore, the guards — the frontline 're-educators' — are often unqualified for the task. In real life, most prisoners just sit out their crimes behind bars with grievances rather than penitence. Some may use the opportunity to review what they did wrong to have been caught in the first place, and widen professional networks with like-minded colleagues. Concerns regarding imprisonment being a rite of passage for juvenile inmates are not unfounded.

That said, prison is also a good place to read, think, and write. Many famous persons would not have produced their magnum opuses had they not been jailed.

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his open letter against racism in Birmingham jail in April 1963. *The Negro Is Your Brother* arguably sowed the seed of King's 'public execution', and America's eventual repackaging of its traditionally racist narratives.

Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years behind bars and accumulated a rich archive of memorable material for his subsequent best seller. But he was nowhere near as prolific as the flatulence-loving Marquis de Sade who wrote nearly fifty novels and plays when incarcerated for being really weird in sexual matters.

Without imprisonment, Marco Polo probably wouldn't have had the leisure and patience of sitting down with Rustichello da Pisa to compose *The Travels*.

Self-declared genius Oscar Wilde was thrown into a 19th century English Flower Lounge for having violated the official sex order of the day. In there, he ran into Jesus, and wrote *De Profundis* which the author no doubt found profoundly moving.

True genius Su Dong Po of Sung Dynasty got himself jailed for some of his brilliantly critical poems. Before his detractors managed to cut his head off, he got himself out of it with the goodbye-world poems he sent to his brother. The Emperor, a secret fan of his, screened all his letters from jail. He was greatly moved by his last words, and ordered his release. By comparison, the equally brilliant Li Bai of Tang Dynasty was fearless when drunk, but quietly cooperative when locked up sober.

Prison is not necessarily a literary desert. In the dorms, dining hall, and workshop, reading and writing were a more common sight than in school campuses, though the primary reading material came from local tabloids. All newspapers were permitted, provided that someone subscribed and paid for them. Contents which could be used by in-house bookies — such as horse racing and football results — were removed. Political news and commentaries were unrestricted. Most inmates were far too street-smart to take them seriously anyway. Triads called themselves *Gu Wark Zai* — smart guys. There was a degree of truth in that presumptuous claim. Comparing to corporate eunuchs, gangsters were much less gullible when it comes to the mainstream media.

The so-called 'library' in tiny Tong Fuk wasn't a room where we could hide among books and be self-righteous about absolute silence, but it did host an impressive collection. Every week, a list of titles was circulated for orders. Librarian *See Hings* would deliver them to the workshop within a few days, as last week's borrowed books were returned. Few libraries in the world provided a comparably personal service. The virtual library was well stocked. Besides popular local titles, one could find a wide range of Chinese classics, works of Western big names such as Steinbeck and Hesse, and other writings in history, philosophy, spirituality and literature. Many if not most of these books had been left behind by past inmates. It made me wonder what odd individuals had spent time behind these bars in front of me.

Though I had always enjoyed reading and writing, I didn't have much time for fictions before retirement. I did write private commentaries and observations once in a while to amuse myself, but the only outlets of my interest in creative writing were Board Meeting Papers. When reading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in Tong Fuk, I wondered how I had missed that great story for so long, considering I had read *The Grapes of Wrath* long ago and liked it a lot. I was busy, I suppose.

Another unexpected discovery was Master Nan Huai Jin.

My curiosity in the Chinese classics had deepened considerably after retirement. I kept discovering in them relevant answers to timeless questions still troubling the modern world. But deciphering the arcane texts was not always easy.

I had heard of Master Nan before, but never read him. I had the wrong impression (don't know where I got it from, but ignorance needs no reference) that he was a preacher in Tantric Buddhism, something which I had mistaken to be a religion.

My deep-seated suspicion of anything religious stemmed from years of experience with brain-laundering religionists during my formative years. All the schools I attended in Hong Kong, from kindergarten to the end of secondary school, were Protestant or Catholic. It wasn't

because I came from a devout family. Quite the contrary, my father prohibited me to adopt any religion before the self-determining age of eighteen. That sensible policy saved me from desperate baptism when I was in Grade Five, panicked by the blistering thoughts of Hell fire which my Bible teacher guaranteed to be inevitable unless I submitted then and there.

History had created a peculiar situation in Hong Kong. More than half of the schools were Christian; and nearly all *brandname* private schools with history and prestige were ecclesiastical subsidiaries. The education system was (still is) dominated by religious institutions, as if Hong Kong were a theocracy. These privileged schools did not openly oppose the pillars of Chinese civilisation — Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, for example — but intentionally or unintentionally gave young and impressionable minds the impression that nearly all things Chinese were old fashioned and backward. Many of my childhood schoolmates, having been guided to equate ignorance in Chinese culture to being 'progressively Western', competed to *boast* how lousy their Chinese was.

How my tiny brain escaped the whirlpool of God's washing-machine is a long horror story. When it fortuitously survived rigorous cerebral scrubbing and wringing, and bounced back around when puberty hit, I had become a fundamentalist atheist reflexively suspicious of all things religious. It was not until late middle age when I realised that Daoism and Buddhism are unquestionably atheistic. They promote enlightenment through meditation, contemplation, and personal *verification* rather than praying to an anthropomorphic and monopolistic one-and-only-true-god. The teachings of Kong Zi (Confucius), also perplexingly classified as a religion in Hong Kong, is even more thoroughly secular. The mundane sage explicitly stayed clear of mysticism, albeit with emphatic respect.

Anyway, thanks to Tong Fuk, I discovered Master Nan through *What Does the Diamond Sutra Say*. I would not have attempted a book with that title had I not been jailed out of my mind. He had a wonderful way of presenting arcane concepts in simple words, and showing the relevance of ancient wisdom in today's troubled humanity. I have since read more than a dozen books by him. To me, his most impressive prediction, made in the 1980s, is that insanity (he specifically included mass insanity) will replace cancer as mankind's number one health hazard in the twenty-first century. That is obviously happening, though insanity doesn't have a clearcut threshold. Plus when the deranged are in the majority, the perception and definition of mental illness will twist and shift accordingly.

After the Diamond Sutra, I read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, hoping to recruit the perspective of someone from afar. It was cute and titillating, a comforting read, but not quite as inspiring as I had hoped.

Overhearing a few young *See Hings* discussing meditation prompted me to borrow *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche. It was my first serious encounter with the basics of meditation. Soon after Tong Fuk, I joined a meditation workshop by coincidence, and have been practising daily ever since. Sogyal Rinpoche's renowned reference guide gives a useful trick in 'facing down' silly thoughts during meditation. Once a stray thought has been recognised (recognition is the first step), it will go away, or be pushed aside relatively easily. Stare at its departure, watch that space, and look out for the next arrival. Anticipating the

appearance of the next intruding distraction single-mindedly turns out to be a remarkable way to focus on, uh, *nothing*.

In my reading notes for the Tibetan book is a quote from Voltaire: 'Anyway, being born twice is no more surprising than being born once.' Once pointed out, it seems pretty obvious. Amazingly, such an insightful deduction is blithely dismissed by many who believe that the indescribably limited human 'science' should be the one and only key to resolving the infinite mystery of existence. Disproportionate human arrogance is perhaps the biggest hurdle for science to make the next big step forward. Science has been going round in circles for nearly a century — a lost particle in a circular accelerator, searching for the end of the tunnel. Like it or not, the culmination of physics, whatever it means, will lead to metaphysics.

I loathed history as a school subject but love good historical nonfictions. When reading Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* in the din of the dining hall, the sickening hypocrisy and unconvincing blindness of King Leopold's contemporary society struck me as being more creepy and revolting than the barbarism of the famously 'philanthropic' King. Modern societies appear to have changed for the better, at least in principle. Have the minds and hearts really changed? Or just just better disguised? A recommendable book in any case. I could have reread it if I had a longer sentence.

Not all library books were good reads, of course.

John Hung was a high profile businessman jailed in 2009 due to a corruption case involving the Jockey Club, of which he was an honorary voting member. His autobiographical *Master of None* was the first prison book I read. I seldom read autobiographies, but was curious about the experience of another Hong Kong person imprisoned in his late middle-age.

Mr. Hung's maternal grandfather was the Senior Chinese Unofficial Member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. Though Chinese and unofficial, he was nevertheless senior, and officially appointed by His Excellency the Governor. Reading his grandpa's title out loud may give a feel for Hung's background. To my disappointment, the book contains very little of the author's personal experience in jail. It turns out to be an overly detailed account of the author's career path which, according to himself, led to nothing much except a strong sense of entitlement. The book name could be a display of humility, or a brag of unearned privileges.

The first half of a small Chinese booklet 反寸世界 by Sir David Tang, grandson of Sir Tang Siu Kin, is quite amusing. Coming from a Chinese family with multiple British titles, the author was born with a silver spittoon under his chin to collect dribbles. To his credit, unlike Mr. Hung, Sir David grew up to be a master of something. Besides a renowned connoisseur in expensive cigars and restaurants, he also founded brandname shop Shanghai Tang.

I enjoyed his sarcastic portrayal of people displaying photos of themselves (and fifty others) standing stiffly in group photos with visiting royalties or low-grade celebrities, but missed his intention at first. After the acerbic critique, he goes on to show, example after example, how *his* photos with movie stars and royalties are personal, a different class altogether. Look, in this photographic insertion, he has his arms around big Hollywood stars in front of his yacht, everyone donning designer tank-tops, high fashion flip-flops clamped between manicured toes.

But that was nothing. He also had Prince Charles' cell phone number — beat that. Imagine: 'Hey, Charles, David. I'm in London. Got time for happy hour?'

Charles has since been promoted to King Charles III, six years after David left this planet. He's probably in the regal company of Henry VIII somewhere up there or down below, chortling over His ex-Majesty's morbid insight into relationships.

* * *

In Due Process



Finally, the appeal notification...

It's not the purpose of this book to dwell on the trial which landed me in jail, or to prove my innocence or otherwise. What's the point? Anyone who has been trawled through the justice system extensively would always be tainted with suspicion in the eyes of some, and innocent to those who believe him to be guiltless from the onset. Furthermore, I know by now guilt is largely decided by judicial whims, luck, and, most critically, money. Facts and evidence are relatively secondary. Nonetheless, this seems a suitable juncture to introduce some kind of deferred prologue.

To do that, I need to go back briefly to the late 1990s.

After years of struggling with the pleasure of being my own boss, I sold my environmental engineering practice to a French multinational in 1996. The sales agreement required me to stay on as Managing Director of the team I had founded a decade ago. My office looked the same, the troubles which arrived at my In-Tray were similar, but I had become part of a giant multinational, a de facto state-owned-enterprise with French characteristics. Most importantly, I started to smile rather than fret on paydays. Paying out bonuses no longer felt like barbecuing my own leg to feed deserving house guests.

The new owner seemed obsessed with strategy formation and structural reorganisation to the exclusion of all else. For a giant corporation with more than two hundred thousand employees worldwide, it changed strategic outlook and organisational philosophy on a quarterly basis. Though the emperor was far away in Paris, his personal eunuchs and court jesters loved visiting Hong Kong, and I became their favourite host and reorganisation target. Coming from a humble professional setup, I soon felt exhausted, and started to daydream about retirement.

After making my intention known, many friends and relatives offered a similar opinion unsolicited: I was too young for retirement. The best was yet to come, et cetera. They all assumed an optimistic future on my behalf with unfounded confidence. *Yeah*, *sure*. These well-

meaning people didn't know that branding a retirement early or late before letting life run its remaining course was rash, and short on logic. If I died the following year, retiring then, at forty-eight, would have been far too late. Otherwise, if I lived on till ninety-nine, then retiring at seventy could still be considered early. Plus I was still young enough to renew my life. What would be the point of retiring at an age too old for anything new? I had worked very hard, sometimes seven days a week, for years. Enough was enough. No more justifications needed. I had lost interest in appearing enthusiastic before bureaucratic clients and even more bureaucratic colleagues from afar. After careful contemplation and evaluation, I decided to retire ASAP.

Then karma intervened.

A leading operator of solid waste — more commonly known as garbage — facilities called me out of the blue, and invited me to join them as Director and General Manager. It was a joint venture between a bluechip British Group rooted in Hong Kong five generations ago, and a French giant — *oui Monsieur, another giant français!* — rival to the one I had been busy getting reorganised by. My background was wastewater treatment, not garbage, but waste is waste, same difference. Timing was so uncanny I simply followed the flow with trancelike curiosity. Leaving the other French early would incur a penalty, but I was happy to buy myself out of perpetual reorganisation. I emphasised my early retirement intention to my new employer, and committed to stay a minimum of three years, and ended up staying twice as long.

I'll call my new employer — the joint venture — *the Company* with capital C. There's no reason whatsoever to hide its identity, but I'm too old and impatient to seek clearance from corporate lawyers — a superfluous step which I might have to take, out of courtesy to my exemployer, if I mention its name directly. In the corporate world this side of common sense, everyone seeks legal opinions on nearly everything. It's the most acceptable way to disperse responsibility and postpone decision. The lawyers' mandate in sizeable conglomerates is to turn business into a risk-free stalemate embalmed in legalese. The slightest uncertainties are transmogrified into daunting risks, overriding common sense, experience, judgement, instincts, and statistics. But it covered everyone's backside, supposedly.

Unfortunately, no matter how well everyone's backside is covered, shit still happens.

The Company's British/Hong Kong shareholder was established in the early 19th century, steep in traditions, but not an Opium Trader (at least not directly) according to the Chairman, and my brief research.

John, the primary or First Defendant in our case, was the founding General Manager. He had moved on to work for the French shareholder when I joined in 2002. Soon afterwards, he fell out with the French; most British managers in French companies do. I recruited him back to *the Company* to manage projects in Macau. He had a long and successful history of establishing our business presence there, with excellent market knowledge and personal connections.

The Company's main business was in Hong Kong, with a stable and dreamily uneventful operation in Macau, established by John back in 1992 in joint venture with a local company. It had been doing an excellent job in keeping the streets of Macau clean, and was cruising

profitably on autopilot by the time I came into the picture in 2002. Representation and liaison with the client — the Macau government — were in the good hands of the minority local partner who charged a handsome but not unreasonable service fee for managing contract-renewal once every few years. That was a classical partnership arrangement for multinationals in extra-territorial businesses. One never knows what one doesn't know about local conditions. Why else would international corps with huge supporting bankers take on minority local partners otherwise?

Our local partner, a Macanese vintage enterprise, was owned by a prominent Chinese family, whose matriarch, the Chairperson of the company, was also President of Macau's Legislative Council — the equivalent of parliament. It was a reputable setup, not a sleazy little middle-man. The company was named after a once prominent Portuguese family whose fortunes had dwindled eons ago. Its present-day scion retained only ten percent of the conglomerate, plus a smudge of vanity from being the company's namesake. One of his few cushy chores was the overseeing of their joint venture with us. For those who have never been to Macau, the tiny Special Administrative Region, once a Portuguese colony thriving on casinos and round-the-clock massage parlours, had inherited the ambiance of a pirate anchorage, more akin to Porto than Vegas. Siesta was flexitime. Everyone snoozed whenever he wanted, and woke up to a higher GDP. So did we, happily, blearily, profitably.

When things are too smooth to be true, breezing along, be careful.

Some sage must have said that long before I was born, I'm sure. However, we were always bogged down by something more timelessly critical, such as Social Responsibility Workshops, weekly retro-reorganisation meetings, or *stratégie* plannings. In any event, staring into the bright blue sky all day looking for hidden thunder-bolts would be time consuming and pointless, bad for mental health.

Unfortunately, thunder does strike out of the blue once in a while.

One fine day, the Portuguese manager (I'll call him Fernando here) was implicated in the pan-Macau corruption scandal. Over in Hong Kong, we were surprised. We didn't know the word *corruption* existed in Macau. Everyone in Macau knew that one must tip the postmen to keep future mails coming. But it looked serious this time. Literally every *who's who* in Macau's incestuous business community was implicated. It would have been extraordinary, unthinkable, a huge loss of face to well-connected Fernando if he wasn't. He had plenty of other businesses with the government besides ours.

Fernando was a charming gentleman who knew everyone in tiny Macau, from the waiters at the Mandarin Oriental Cafe to the Chief Executive of the Special Administration Region. His family had been there forever. His forebears probably got off the boat donning soggy perukes, looking damp and majestic in the late 16th century. Since Macau returned to China in 1999, the economy had boomed against gravity. In recent years, many antiquated Macau Portuguese, supported by language skills and comprador genes, have become useful bridges for outside parties seeking entry to the Macau market.

Macanese of Portuguese descent had over the centuries evolved into a coloniser-compradore hybrid. They looked Chinese, with barely noticeable stains from their Atlantic bloodline. Their DNA had long been localised through marital and extramarital procreations. But they remained

peculiarly European to the locals. To outsiders, however, they were mysteriously Chinese. They often spoke in half sentences about their connections to a profitable mystery which they could not elaborate further — wink wink.

Fernando's ancestral fortunes had diminished long ago, but he projected the impression that deep down, behind the facade of China's Vegas, Macau was still swayed and shaped by people like him. Elegantly tall and slim, gently bulging at the waistline from good food, he spoke Cantonese, English and Portuguese, all perfectly. His flexible sense of amorality, acquired through tradition and upbringing, helped him navigate effortlessly between conflicting principles with universal neutrality. He was far from stupid, but privilege had greatly diminished his cerebral potentials.

To Fernando, life had always been good and easy, naturally smooth, until shit hit the fan. The Secretary for Transport and Public Works Mr. Ao Man Long — someone I had never had the misfortune to meet — was allegedly outlandishly corrupt. Oh dear, what a surprise.

These allegations had surfaced before, come and gone from the headlines, good for a snigger. After all, it was an open secret that every cog and flywheel of the Macanese mechanism required lubrication. But this time, the Westin Golf Club suddenly became all quiet. Many members had left town without a forwarding address. Perhaps they knew something Fernando didn't? No matter, he remained cool, latino blasé. Why not? His boss was the President of the Legislative Council. Whoever had heard of a civil service minister taking bribe from the President of parliament? Furthermore, the magistrate and the Chief Executive were both Fernando's golf buddies. Plus, be real, nobody — not a Portuguese gentleman anyway — had ever been jailed there for bribery since Governor Francisco Mascarenhas took office in 1623. The possibility of a serious crack down was ridiculous, too surreal to grasp, and Fernando's imagination had been in siesta mode since birth. As a professional optimist, he focused on the bright side instead; booking at the Westin Golf Club had become easy. No need to phone ahead. Just walk right in and tee off.

Fernando ended up getting tried by his golf mate magistrate, who eventually sentenced him to ten years in jail in June 2008. One less competitor for tee time. Poor Fernando was one of only three non-family members of Mr. Ao to face the legal process in Macau's historic show of justice. I felt very sorry for him because I liked him. But there wasn't anything *the Company*, as extraterritorial business partner, could do. Plus I had finally retired in February that year, nearly one and a half years after I handed in my notice to the Chairman, to start the next phase of life which, unimaginable to me at the time, included imprisonment.

A small business is vulnerable. Everything can be a matter of survival. To keep it going requires courage, gut feeling, gambling instinct, a pinch of stupidity, and a good measure of luck. A big corporation, on the other hand, is an ecosystem. The animals in it may thrive or expire, but the ecosystem continues on. Those at the top end of the food chain eat very well as long as their redundant nature remains unconfirmed. Since they have no line duties, appearing indispensable requires special talents, hence their handsome remunerations. French executives' repertoire, probably something they teach at the $\acute{E}cole$ Polytechnique, is strategic planning and

reorganisation. It's a highly effective way to get everyone worrying about their job, therefore the CEO's pivotal importance, without changing anything. Quite a fascinating tactic, actually. Though frequent repetition can make anything tedious.

By the end of 2006, I decided it was time to quit. I informed my chairman of the board my intention to retire. He asked me to stay another year, and help recruit my successor. Finally, in February 2008, with a great retirement party, I withdrew from *work work*. In the following year, I was working on my first novel while totally unexpected events coalesced in the background.

A whole year after Fernando had been jailed, he suddenly overturned his previous confessions and filed a report with the Hong Kong ICAC — Hong Kong's anti-corruption agency — alleging that *the Company* and its executives had conspired with him in the Macau corruption scandal.

Why after all that time? Money, of course. Due to the unexpected circumstances in Macau, legal advisors of *the Company* advised against paying the balance of Fernando's consultancy fees. I would have objected had I not retired. You pay someone money in instalments for a service. What he does with the money is none of your business. There's no reason to withhold payment because he's done something illegal. But I'm not a lawyer. Anyway, sitting in jail, feeling lonely, abandoned, even betrayed, the sudden emergence of a wickedly vindictive thought in Fernando's head is understandable, at least imaginable.

Very early one morning in mid-2009, ICAC agents dragged me out of a boring dream to moonwalk through the due process of the law.

Hong Kong has adopted the doctrine that judicial independence and total unaccountability meant justice. Justice is exclusive turf on which no one could interfere. Of course, not every player in the judiciary takes advantage of his sacrosanct independence. But judges are humans, most are anyway, and *Homo sapiens* tend to take prerogatives for granted, especially when they have been declared untouchable.

As an unwilling spectator, I saw judges and lawyers roaming the legal landscape unrestrained like lunar explorers with unlimited oxygen supply. In suspended animation, they stopped and gazed at anything they arbitrarily deemed worthy of examination with timeless patience, while getting generously paid.

Look, Your Honour, a piece of rock. To the untrained eye, it looks just like a million others littering the law book.

Mmm. Very interesting, Mr. Armstrong.

Should we examine the underside?

Is it appropriate? It may involve flipping it over. Would it contaminate the evidence. What does the rule book say?

There's no precedent, Your Honour. Moon rocks are unique, and this one came from another jurisdiction.

Mmm. Let's adjourn and give it due consideration then...

That'd be most prudent, Your Honour. Can someone mark this piece of rock?

Yes, of course. Thank you for the reminder Mr. Armstrong. Please mark the rock for now, while we contemplate the next course of action. Until then...

Co...ourt!

I found it kind of amusing at first, but soon grew tired of it.

When the ICAC invited me to 'assist investigation', I naively believed that having nothing to hide, I should simply cooperate fully. I stupidly spent hours chitchatting with the officers, giving them plenty of irrelevant material to selectively cut and paste together a condemning story. With hindsight and experience, I now would advise anyone in a similar situation to follow official advice and remain absolutely silent. Say nothing no matter how innocent you know or think you are. Suppress the tendency to explain your innocence. *Don't try to be helpful!* Call a lawyer immediately. It's most unfortunate, but that's reality unless you like trouble. Normal cops don't need to invent new cases to make a living. ICAC officers' jobs and careers depend on prosecution, not illusive justice. Most of their contracts are renewable every two years or so.

One of my ineptitudes is that I'm a sucker for new experiences. Being arrested and interrogated was intriguing at first. But after a one night stand at an ICAC cell, I sobered up. The way they repeated certain questions gave away their intention to obfuscate the timeline and rearrange events (including publicly available information such as details of the ultra corrupt minister in Macau) by asking questions out of sequence and context, again and again, using different approaches. At that point, I called *the Company*, which arranged a lawyer immediately. The lawyer was Derek. He gave only one piece of advice: 'Say nothing. Absolutely nothing.' They then let me go. I found out later that John had been my next cell neighbour the previous night.

Nothing happened for many months after the initial invitation.

Just as we thought the whole thing would whimper away, John and I were charged for conspiracy to offer advantage in Macau. What? Even if that were true, Macau wasn't, still isn't, perhaps never will be, a part of Hong Kong. It was an entirely different jurisdiction under one country. I thought only thuggish empires with aircraft carriers could disregard jurisdiction boundaries. Plus by then, engendered by the sensational corruption scandal, it had been widely reported in the news that everyone in Macau had been bribing everyone else for centuries, suggesting that Macau's playing field — which was none of Hong Kong's business — was paradoxically level. If every bidder prepared his most competent bid, knowing that the winner would have to pay a percentage to the crooks, it would have been bribery for sure, but without procuring any advantage whatsoever.

No matter, the ICAC managed to construct a case against us, based on numerous inconsistent and self-contradictory claims by Fernando — the sole witness in this case. I was baffled but arrogantly nonchalant. Even my online legal dictionary agreed: 'Generally, there can be no conviction solely on the basis of what is said by an accomplice witness; there must be evidence from an unrelated source to corroborate the witness's testimony.' In our case, there was practically nothing incriminating, zilch, besides the words of Fernando.

Fernando had previously given the investigators, lower and upper courts in Macau four contradicting testimonies, all of which claimed that he had acted alone in all dealings with the Macau government, therefore fundamentally different from what he was telling the Hong Kong

court this time. *Now, how do you explain that?* Well, under cross-examination, he calmly and meekly told the judge he had been lying all along until this very moment. Being dishonest had been bothering him, laying a burden on his conscience. That's why he finally decided to let the real truth come out. Legality buffs who love eye-openers can search for his unbelievably frank admission from the court's archive.

Ha, just you wait. We had something even more convincing, more irrefutable, to categorically prove Fernando unreliable.

'What about the letter you sent to *the Company* from prison, through a Macau lawyer, demanding money, or, as you promised in black and white, signed, sealed, delivered, that *there'll be trouble*?' My counsel asked Fernando in cross-examination, and presented the letter to the judge, requesting that it be admitted as an exhibit. John and I exchanged triumphant glee. 'Furthermore, a few days after the Company replied in the negative, you called the Hong Kong ICAC to file a case against the defendants. Is that correct, Mr. Fernando?'

Bingo! I wanted to stand up and cheer.

Blackmailing in black and white is highly unusual, but Fernando liked to put murky things on proper record. During his trial in Macau, it was revealed that he did pass on a small fraction of his company's Partner's Fees to the corrupt minister in personal cheques. He had singlehandedly revolutionised the centuries-old 'brown paper bag' practice. Come to think of it, we could have used that as defence. For nobody with an IQ over 30 would have done that. John and I could have taken an IQ test to show we were far too clever to be an accomplice in Fernando's dealings.

'That's correct,' admitted Fernando, as if confessing infidelity to his priest. He had reportedly become a reborn Catholic in the past year, a remarkable transformation in the 21st century. 'I asked for the money because I wished to pay back the Macau Government for my past wrong deeds.' Seeking out redemption opportunities is nothing unusual for a devout catholic, but someone in the gallery gasped. Someone else giggled. Cynics, obviously.

'The timing was purely coincidental,' he declared under oath.

The judge listened, studied the letter, admitted it as an exhibit, made notes, and nodded knowingly.

After the judge declared the day over at quarter to four as usual, John and I went for coffee with the legal team. We could hardly hide our elation. It had obviously been a decidedly good day. But cynical Derek was quick to pour ice over our optimism. 'Judges don't think like we do. The honourable judge might have found Fernando's free confession commendable,' he explained. 'If I were a crooked ICAC agent, I would have coached the witness to admit to having lied, hoping to get the issue checked off rather than arguing against indisputable facts.'

I've heard that before, but was nonetheless shocked by him giving such a contemptuous assessment of the Judge's intelligence in front of his colleagues.

'What?' John was dumbfounded.

'Well, but ICAC agents aren't crooked, in theory,' he added with a lawyer smile.

John's counsel, a vertically challenged Aussie who was reputably well-liked among ageing male white judges and lawyers for his endless supply of facetious remarks, was sleazily client-

friendly as always. He agreed with us that it had been a good session, and in any case we needed not worry because 'a *gweilo* judge isn't going to send a *gweilo* to jail.'

What?! What a shocking remark, albeit a welcome one under the circumstances. If what he said was true, it would be patently unacceptable. If what just came out of his mouth was nonsense, then he had downgraded himself from cheaply facetious to offensive.

'Are you saying the British judge won't send John to jail because he's a fellow Brit? What about me?' I demanded clarification. There was an uncomfortable silence.

'Well, if the First Defendant is acquitted, the Second Defendant walks free too, haha!' he winked. Very funny.

This went on for many months. Most days were drearily uneventful.

Then, finally, on Leap Day 2012, we were convicted. Derek was right. John's expensive counsel was wrong, as usual.

* * *

Return to Hell Hole



After living in dehumidified bubbles for decades, I had long forgotten how excruciating wet air is, and how much I loathed springtime.

While folks living in more temperate climates glorify the month of May, Pacific moisture smothers Hong Kong. It's called *Hui Nan* — Return of the Southerly Wind. Condensate streaks down walls and furniture. Everything turns mouldy. It requires willpower to breathe.

As I laboured to take in the vicious air, trees and wild plants at bucolic Tong Fuk embraced it with a fresh coat of green. A layer of new life had emerged to mask the beginning, or ending, of yet another cycle, bringing us closer to death. To us cons, nothing had changed otherwise, just the same routine over and over again in oppressive humidity.

My dorm-mates draped the coarse military blankets from bunkbed guardrails to dewater by gravity. After about half an hour, water started to drip from the bottom edge in big drops, making the floor wet and slippery. Preferring to keep my blankets evenly moist rather than partially soaked, I let mine be. They had become clammy and heavy, but the nights were still coolish. Anticipating a hot and wet summer in Tong Fuk was depressing.

On the 7th of May, I was summoned to Fingerprint Room and told that our appeal application would be heard in the High Court two days later. It will be an application hearing to

decide if we had sufficient grounds for appeal. If the senior judges opined that we did, then our lawyer boys will try to get us out on bail to await the lengthy process. I tried to maintain an even mind. No anticipation. No wishful thinking. A guard had told me that even if appeal was granted, release from custody on bail was rare, averaging just a few per year according to Tong Fuk statistics. He was not the most encouraging person I knew, but brutally realistic.

But hope, like fear, or humidity, is hard to quell. The sages were right about it being a potential hazard. After receiving this hopeful news, I lost concentration for the rest of the day, desperately trying to think about nothing.

In the evening, I distributed my meagre possessions to a few friends, in case I got lucky and stayed out on bail. A few cellmates wished me good luck. Uncle Zhao Xing, the mainland fisherman who smuggled three illegal workers across the border, shook my hand warmly and wished me luck. That was my second prison handshake. The first was with Joe the self-made Triad at Lai Chi Kok. I had been Uncle Zhao Xing's only cellmate who listened to his story with sincere interest, and patience. Many bullied him mildly because he was a mainlander who never stuttered back. Though five years my junior, he loved telling me things as if I were a kid. I knew he'd miss me.

'Thanks, Uncle Zhao Xing!' I squeezed his enormous rough hand with both mine. I wanted to give him a hug if that wasn't such an odd thing to do in the slammer.

I had used up all the cigarettes bought with my first pay check to settle various advance services. Stanley gave me six cigarettes to clear my current debts: Two for a haircut from Xiao Long on emergency notice; four to the Vietnamese who cleaned the workshop. Didn't want to deny his hard-earned remuneration. Stan neither smoked nor ate junk food, and had been in jail for some time. He was loaded. Plus I somehow knew that we would meet again out there one day. Meanwhile, if I didn't return, I knew he would miss having me to chat with. He still didn't like the cons.

Ah Wah was happy for me, but a little moody, silently reading *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* again. Perhaps I reminded him that such moments of hope, however remote, however tenuous, however unpredictable and potentially toxic, were a luxury far beyond his wildest beaten dreams. It was then that I decided to write a story about him one day.

At breakfast next morning, Xiao Long came over my table to wish me luck. I told him I'll transfer all good luck to him: 'I don't need good luck at my age, just no more bad ones. You can put good luck to better use, my friend.' I meant every word of it. He accepted my two fags for the haircut only after I threatened to break them.

At nine, I reported to the Fingerprint Room. I was paid HK\$646.40, the outstanding balance of my sewing labour. I signed on the dotted line to acknowledge that it was final, fair, and accurate, thereby foregoing my rights to claim the CSD for the rest of my life. The money went into a plastic portfolio which will accompany me to Lai Chi Kok. If I returned after court appearance, which was more likely than not, the money will go straight back to the prison accountant.

'Understood. Thank you, Sir.'

After settling the finance, I waited in the filing room where two inmate clerks were in attendance.

Being a clerk at the Fingerprint Room was a privilege reserved for educated inmates with no tendency or capacity for violence or escape. One of them was an amicable fellow from show business, also an ICAC case. I didn't ask him too many questions lest it reveal my total ignorance of Hong Kong showbiz personalities, something which he might have regarded incredible or phoney.

We chatted inconsequentially. He swore only sparingly, which sounded odd after more than two months of hearing *fucks* in every sentence. He knew a lot about the goings-on at Tong Fuk, and shared a few gossips. I pretended to be impressed. Filing clerks and drivers always know a lot about the inner secrets of things. In government offices, photocopying clerks know the result of a bid well before official announcement when they prepare multiple copies of contract documents submitted by the winning bidder. Since the Age of Computers, the lowly server engineer has unlimited access to all information going through the server. That practically includes everything these days, including the big boss' stealthy browsing habit behind closed doors. There's no solution to these security weak points unless Mr. Chairman who hardly knows how to boot up his own machine maintains the server himself, or a Senior Inspector is willing to do the filing work at Tong Fuk.

Three hours passed easily. The past two months had trained me to be inordinately patient with idling. I could now sit for hours without knowing why, and not be irritated. My butt had developed a layer of rough skin on each cheek for this very task.

'Want a piece of toast?' One of the clerks asked out of the blue. It was nearly time for lunch, my least favourite meal of the day. They are and slept apart from other inmates because they knew too much.

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'Toast? You have a toaster here?'
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'We have an iron,' he gave a mischievous smile.

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'Oh yeah, I'd love to. Thank you.'
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How many toasts had I had before? Thousands, many thousands. But that one prepared with an electric iron, hot and crispy, generously buttered by a bespectacled convict, was by far the best — absolutely memorable. Evidently, the household iron makes much better toasts than the toaster. I have not attempted to repeat the experience at home because my wife wouldn't understand, and I don't want to ruin the memory of the piece of magical toast I had in the filing office of Tong Fuk prison.

Another three hours had passed. It was a record. I was starting to wonder if this going-to-the-high-court thing was a prank after all when an officer came in and asked: '365820?'

Eh, with due respect, Ah Sir, do you see another person waiting here in the past six hours?

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'Yes sir!'
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'Follow me.'

'Yes sir!'

Keung Ge, an inmate from the Kitchen Team, shared a handcuff with me.

We boarded a van. When exiting through the double-gated buffer zone, I saw where visitors entered the compound and thought of Satu and Fai coming out all this way to see me every week. On the right side was a sizeable alter of Guan Gong — a hero from the Three Kingdom Period universally revered by the underprivileged. He represented righteousness and bravery, and was the only semi-deified figure worshipped by cops and robbers, Triads and prison guards, restaurant operators, prostitutes *et al.* I mentally bowed as we passed, requesting justice. For once, please, let justice be on *my* terms this time, according to *my* common sense, not the court's.

Before I finished my longwinded mental petition, the final gate fanned open slowly, revealing a strange world which I had once taken for granted. We moved on. I stared straight ahead. Ah Zong had told me to *never* look back when leaving a prison. 'Otherwise, bad fucking omen. Leave this behind. Leave everything behind, or you might come back.' I followed his advice closely, brushing away the thought that it obviously hadn't worked for him; he had been jailed quite a few times.

My handcuff-mate was about forty-something, of average height and slight build. He looked frail but tough — tough in terms of tenacity, not power. This combination of frailty and toughness no longer seemed oxymoronic. I had now met many poor, frail, but tough people. He seemed friendly, but compared with talkative Malay whom I had arrived with, he was mute.

We exchanged smiles, but did not converse. There would be time enough.

I was possessed by mortifying thoughts, imagining the worst, managing expectation.

A crabby judge might find our sentence too light tomorrow. 'I am aghast at the light sentence dispensed for serious criminals like you two, especially you,' he stabs at me with big round angry eyes. 'You've been making denigrating remarks about the judiciary. You think we don't know? Your notebooks have been monitored, but you're stupid and arrogant enough not to have thought of that possibility in prison,' he sneers. 'You are to serve an additional three years for contempt of court, and for having wasted my time processing your asinine application.'

Cooourt!

I shuddered. I wouldn't be surprised by such an outcome. Not anymore. Nothing surprised me anymore.

I finally succeeded in purging all hopes and expectations with the image of a fuming judge, grey curly horsehair standing erect on his head, wavering in the air-conditioned draught.

Keung Ge and I were the only unpaid passengers on the cruise to Lai Chi Kok. His arms and legs were blue with many tattoos. I didn't stare long enough to discern the busy design. There were probably multiple layers, new patterns superimposed upon older ones.

'I jumped bail for a minor DD eight years ago, and went to Shenzhen,' he told me as the ferry set sail towards Stonecutter Island. DD is Dangerous Drugs, a CSD term for drug trafficking. 'Back then, it was possible to await trial on bail for DD. No longer.'

In Shenzhen, he found a job, met a woman, and settled down as a normal hardworking salaried man. Soon, he got addicted to love and peace. When their four-year-old son couldn't join his kindergarten field trips to Hong Kong because his identity was befuddled by his father's problematic history, Keung Ge's heart ached. He eventually checked with a lawyer who assured him that if he turned himself in, he would get about two years. His case was minor. It happened long ago, and the authorities were usually magnanimous with people who submitted without a chase. On that advice, he arranged things for the family, and turned himself in at the boarder.

Amazingly, he got exactly two years. The lawyer knew his stuff.

'I have a bad case of nose and eye allergy, so am using this time to get free medical treatment,' he told me. He was going to LCK that night for a medical appointment the next day. Convicts are taken to hospital in waist chains, like vicious dogs. A spectacle for bored waiting room patients.

It had been only two months since I last visited LCK, yet it looked very different. We were taken to a recently refurbished wing — a renovated hell hole. It used to be the women's quarter. We took showers, then ate at the dining hall. There were other transiting inmates. I sat across the table from an ON, a Canadian from Toronto who graduated in criminology from Windsor where I did my bachelor in engineering. Small odd world indeed. I glanced at his ID. *Fraud*, it said.

Keung Ge knew LCK very well. We were assigned to a room currently occupied by two duty inmates from Tong Fuk. They had been staying at LCK temporarily due to medical reasons. One broke his shin bone playing football, and had to go to the hospital once every few days. They knew Keung Ge well, and I was accepted immediately because I was a Tong Fuk man. It's funny how anything in common, even a transient and distressing one, helps foster bonding. We exchanged news like captured soldiers from the same division reunited in a POW camp.

Unlike my first night at LCK two months ago, I slept soundly, and heard no cats.

The next morning, we had room service breakfast. Due to some administrative error, perhaps a good omen that I had already finished all my prison meals according to some celestial checklist, my name, number rather, was missing.

'You must eat! You're going to court. You need to be in good shape,' Keung Ge insisted.

'That's fine. Missing breakfast won't kill me. Don't worry.'

He forced two packs of biscuits into my hand. They were emergency supplies given by his mates. He was at the bottom of the pay-scale due to frequent medical leaves, and could hardly afford junk foods. His friends gave him the biscuits in case he had to sit around for hours not knowing why and for how long, blood sugar plunging. I finally capitulated and ate them in front of him, thanking him profusely, secretly ashamed. In jail, two packets of soda biscuits were a lot more than *just* two packets of soda biscuits. I knew I would not have done the same to him had

we swapped position. I was still a middle-class professional, albeit a retired one. I planned my resources carefully, especially when facing scarcity. I was *sensible*, incorrigibly so.

I was once again treated generously by someone who had nothing in common with me. And we both knew that in all likelihood, our paths would never cross again. Another goddamned guilt trip.

After breakfast, we were led to the Fingerprint Room. I promptly lost Keung Ge in the LCK chaos. I would have liked to say goodbye properly.

Carried by the human current, I sat and waited patiently, as was my new life-skill. An Indian inspector chatted me up. I mentioned jokingly that room service had forgotten my breakfast. 'No! Can't go to court with an empty stomach!' Before I could protest, he ordered a plate delivered to me at the Fingerprint room. Was he the same guy who had helped me two months ago? Amidst great confusion, I had not registered his face, but I think he was a different person. 'How come there're so many great guys in this horrible place?' I wondered.

I wasn't hungry, but I finished my plate out of respect and gratitude.

Right after that, with uncharacteristic haste, I was given my street cloths to change into. We had a court schedule to meet. The van which took me and a few others to court were compartmentalised. We were seated in our own little cage which reminded me of Catholic confession booths. I had nothing to confess. I regulated my breath, and mutely recited the Heart Sutra to put time away, lest it stretch and stall.

At the entrance of High Court's basement carpark was another Guan Gong alter. Even the High Court lobbied for his patronage. I bowed imperceptibly. *Hi there, Lord Guan*.

In Cell No.69, I continued my silent chant of the Heart Sutra inside, again and again.

Bodhisattva Guanyin in deep Prajnaparamita meditation reflects upon the emptiness of the five aggregates, transcending all tribulations and sufferings...

I recited it vigorously in my heart to block out all thoughts. *Existence is empty...* Everything's empty...

John went past in his office uniform, escorted by a guard. He didn't see me. He somehow walked lighter in stiff heavy leather shoes than slippers.

I returned to the Heart Sutra...

'Come!' a guard said as he unlocked my cell.

'Yes sir!'

It must have been about ten. After a busy morning, the day had only just begun. Getting up early made the day much longer. The judge was ready. To him, this pivotal occasion was the beginning of just another boring work day.

* * *

THREE Shadows of the Mind

Reflections can light up the shadows of the mind

Freedom

Freedom isn't always rational. We often claim to love freedom without knowing what it is. Thoughtful analysis doesn't seem to help clarify its fallacious characteristics either. Why then do so many people glorify freedom without knowing what it is or what to do with it?

Those were the kind of thoughts I toyed with at Tong Fuk's playground, as my dwindling muscles *Zharm Zhong* struggled to stay still while my mind roved. Kung fu students use the training technique to channel mental energy to charge every fibre in his body with explosive power. Mind over matter. Mind creates matter. Mind matters. I was too old for that kind of illusion. It was merely my 'Do Not Disturb' sign when I daydreamed to kill time.

A few meters away, young inmates were chasing after a ball, screaming: *Here! here!* They all wanted it. A dozen or so *See Hings* slouched around the picnic tables to watch televised monsters roaring and panting over today's duel. A few inmates strolled around the pitch, taking in fresh air, shooting the breeze. An uproarious laughter broke out at the pingpong corner, followed by an outburst of viciously friendly expletives. Xiao Long, the solitary Little Dragon, studied English at a quiet corner, tunnelling through strange words and secret reveries.

They were mostly having fun — peaceful, wholesome, fun.

In an hour or so, dinner will be served. There'll be fish, alas, but without force-feeding, therefore technically not a torture. Objectively, life wasn't so bad. I had been enjoying a similar post-retirement routine at home. But why couldn't we, with the irritating exceptions of Malay and Taiwan, wholeheartedly enjoy life right there and then? Some might have, but would not even admit it to themselves lest they started doubting their own sanity. Prisoners are supposed to be miserable, adamantly unhappy because they have lost their freedom. Someone has taken it away from them as a form of punishment. And freedom is priceless. Only crazy people can enjoy life without freedom.

What *is* freedom though? I mused with a pragmatic frown. Just a simple question on the nature of a very common concept, not pretending to be philosophical.

Like most busy people, I had not analysed freedom before. Now that I had lost it and was yearning for it badly, I realised I didn't know what it meant. I believed most if not all in this playground didn't either. Freedom was good and essential by default — unquestionably so. It sounded crazy to question something so intuitive, so taken for granted.

The Hungarian poet Petöfi Sándor came to mind. He famously put liberty above love, and love before life. At one time, I was a fan of his defiant verses. Putting freedom over love and love over life somehow struck the right cord with my teenage heart. Unfortunately, as I involuntarily aged, Sándor's unfeasible preferences became paradoxical and petulant rather than

romantic and heroic. If he was referring to abstract political freedom, it would be metaphorically understandable. On a personal level, however, being absolutely and undefinably *free* without love could result in an eery, empty existence, the kind which might drive some people to commit suicide. And loving without life is existentially ridiculous regardless of poetic merits. Regrettably, Sándor died early in his mid-twenties. He didn't have the opportunity to test his passionate priorities with life experience.

I didn't mean to slam liberty. Due to genetic defects, I had been what impressionable folks labelled a 'free spirit' with a sneer before I learnt how to repackage it for social consumption. It's just that retreating in Tong Fuk Flower Lounge, surrounded by people who had been denied freedom, I couldn't help myself contemplating the nature of freedom.

Superficially, physical freedom appeared straight forward enough. If I'm allowed to go anywhere I wish, I would in principle be physically free. But to exercise freedom in the present world order, one needs means — i.e. money. No money no freedom is an unquestionable reality unquestioned by fair-minded folks.

Without money, freedom is a chimera, or fucking bullshit, my *See Hings* would say. Even when not in jail, most of them seldom have the freedom to get out of bed whenever they feel like, engage in inspiring activities, choose the company of amicable folks, or get fat on exquisite cuisines. The Tong Fuk life which they vehemently detest isn't very different from the ones they usually lead as far as I knew. In fact, life is probably more stable and comfortable inside here. Upon regaining freedom, some of them would return to coffin-size rental cages stacked up in the clammy shadows of Mong Kok, clinging onto the fringe of society like worker bees in a swarming hive — feeling agitated, desperate, helpless, definitely not *free*.

As I thought about bees, one fortuitously landed on my football briefly, then hurried off to find something more palatable. It looked busy.

Are you free? I mentally mumbled after the departing insect. It promptly disappeared from my sight. If bees are free, then what makes them slave over nectar and pollen to feed an overcrowded hive too busy to say thank you? They can fly. To poetic minds, anything that flies is free. Flying and freedom are metaphorical partners. But worker bees contradict this assumption. They can fly from an early age, but grow up to be career slaves. They live only a few weeks in the summer, literally working themselves to premature death from collecting nectar and pollen for others. Why don't they just take off to enjoy the splendid season and possibly live longer? They're not tied down by love or family obligation anyway. Give me liberty, or give me death doesn't apply to them. They voluntarily sacrifice liberty for death. Are there nano chains around their stripy little bellies?

Bees and paupers are not free to exercise freedom even when they aren't denied it. One is bound by instincts, the other money, or the lack of it.

What about people with means and status? Money can't buy love, but can it buy freedom?

I imagined the lives of royals, big-shot politicians and mega tycoons from ancient times to the present, and concluded that none of them were remotely free. Had the King of England

wanted to retire and move to Bangladesh, he would not have the freedom to do so. The rich and powerful are in fact less free than us inmates. We think we know what's imprisoning us. Most kings and tycoons don't. They can't even fantasise an escape as they can't picture what to escape from.

What about the jolly middle-class?

They live comfortably above subsistence, and enjoy anonymity. But don't they rise in the morning to self-administered sirens, according to schedules dictated by latent forces, just like we do? They dress in conformance with expectation rather than comfort or common sense, then plunge into the morning crowd camouflaged, as if eager to start yet another humdrum day mostly, maybe totally, beyond their control or comprehension. Middle-class 'freemen' are always pressed for time — time is money, which can be used to purchase pleasure during their free time, which doesn't happen very often.

And there's no free lunch in the outside world. One must work for every grain of rice. At the end of Tong Fuk working hours, we stop, period. Office workers send messages home: 'May be late. Project deadline. Nobody's leaving yet. Love you.' Self-motivated and ambitious employees work overtime on their own initiative, of their own *free will*, just like bees.

Exhausted professionals without criminal record eventually go home to watch TV, interact reflexively in social media, or chat inconsequentially like cons do. Smoking is allowed anywhere here, even in bed, never in health-conscious middle-class homes. There are more of the same for them to accomplish tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after the day after that, so, stay healthy. No smoking anywhere.

Freedom? What freedom?

The more I thought about freedom, the less I understood it.

Why then do these guys all want out? I stayed motionless but my mind drifted back to my imprisoned colleagues at the playground momentarily. From their chitchats, it seems that sex is a popular reason, especially among the boys. 'When out, I'm going to fuck fuck for a whole week, ha ha...' they all say. Incredibly, junk food is another often cited reason. Everyone wants junk food unlimited. It's a strange world.

What about me? Why do I also want out? I asked myself.

My answer was quite straightforward. My bed at home was *much* more comfortable, and I could talk about nearly everything with my family, something which I suspect to be not as common as it should be.

What about mental and spiritual freedom? Is it more important and less illusive than physical freedom?

Not really. To start with, barring surgical rewiring or chemical manipulation, I can't imagine how anyone could be denied mental freedom. Restricting expression is often practised, but that's superficial, not a meaningful denial of mental freedom. If I keep my mouth shut and let my mind run, it'd be impossible to detect, not to say suppress, my mental freedom. How could anyone stop me *thinking* freely if I don't reveal my thoughts, which are none of their business anyway? Plus after having met folks from all over the planet, I have encountered maybe a

handful of *free thinkers*. Freedom in the mind is irrelevant to the overwhelming majority who's been told that it's critically important. Mental liberty is actually a moot point.

'Fall in!' An officer derailed my train of thought just as it was about to emerge from the dark loopy tunnel.

Everyone took their time. Flip flop flip flop. In the old days, jail guards had whistles. Now they have to yell repeatedly like primary school PE teachers. The footballers continued until yet another ball got kicked over the fence, then sauntered to the pingpong corner to change back into slippers, leaving behind a steamy pile of thin-soled sneakers.

I did a few forward bends to wake up from my mental jailbreak, then picked up my possession bag from the floor and joined the line.

Why don't bees just take off? Why do we all want out?

I was still toying with the same questions while struggling to swallow the gooey evening bun. It got badly stuck to the back of my teeth and palate but I couldn't get water to flush it down just yet. A bodybuilding thug had conscripted both jerrycans of water, lifting them repeatedly — thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two...Had he been ordered to do that by the guards, he would have had a legitimate reason to complain. I didn't want to interrupt his self-punishment.

Next to his gym area, less muscular kids were partying as usual, laughing their heads off over their modest repertoire of silly games. Tonight they played *firing squad*. They had rock-paper-scissored earlier. The loser now stood with his face against the wall, underpants pulled down to his knees. His pals were shooting paper bullets at his bare bum with elastic bands from five steps away, creating crispy smacks on the fleshy target. A few beds away, the mainlanders were playing chess. Opposite me, Ah Wah had drifted off to his kung fu wonderland unblinking. Nearby, Gollum was thumbing through his worn Bible in search for atonement, or instructions to exorcise his demon. He was due for imminent discharge. As freedom loomed, he lost weight. He seemed petrified.

I pictured someone born and raised inside an internment camp.

Throughout his life, older inmates tell him how wonderful the outside world is: 'There's freedom out there. *Freedom!* imagine, since you've never tasted it.' After decades, this person, now in his midlife, is suddenly told that he can leave tomorrow.

'Just yourself. Don't ask why. Remember: Once out, you can't return.'

Is that good news? After a sleepless night, he might beg to stay. Venturing into the unknown is scary, kind of like death, just like death. Even deeply religious folks who claim they look forward to enjoying everlasting life pray for recovery rather than quick death when fallen ill.

On the other hand, if the camp's gate is flung wide-open, he'll rush out with others without hesitation, full of adrenalin. Is that why so many are scared to death about personal death, but rapturous about the end of the world? This could be turned into an interesting story one day...

Smack! Ouch! Smack! Aow! Smack! Aiya!! Dew Lay Lo Mo! Ha ha ha...

The sound of paper bullets hitting their target dead on had become louder and more penetrating. The firing squad had inched closer to their new victim. Ah, Bozo again, of course.

Whenever Bozo was the target, the firing squad inched closer. He never turned to check. Perhaps he didn't want to. How weird. I wondered why. Being stupid was the first answer which came to mind. Besides a lack of intelligence, it also seemed obvious that he didn't want to spoil his unique and popular role in this game. Being rejected would have been ten times more painful to poor lonely Bozo than execution.

I know! It's not freedom that we want. Quite the opposite. We want familiarity, reassuring humdrum! Thank you Bozo!

Subconsciously, most of us prefer familiarity over freedom, just that it's cool to insist otherwise. Gangsters put on a defiant look to conform with peer expectations and gangland image, that's all. Routines, even detestable ones, make us feel that life is under control. Why else do billionaires bitch about work, claiming they look forward to retirement while contriving all kinds of excuses to postpone it perpetually?

Maybe our disposition to routine is genetically coded. Only odd mutants can wholeheartedly and truly enjoy total freedom. Societies — be them bureaucracies, churches or Triads — inevitably pressure outliers to get into orbit, or else. Even disobedient kids feel more secure knowing that there are rules around. Imagine a child coming into this strange world, growing up without rules and boundaries...It'd be very scary.

The execution had stopped for the night. Bozo lied in bed on his stomach, pretending nothing was hurting. A few boys stood in a circle to repeat to each other the great fucking old days when big mother fucking Fat Dick beat the fucking crap out of the fucking retard from Numbers Gang in TST.

Remember that?

Yeah yeah yeah! Ha ha ha!

I sure fucking did. I'd heard many fucking versions of that same fucking story many fucking times.

Muscle Man was done with the water cans, and had gone to the washroom to wipe his sweaty self down. I poured out a mug of water, drank it thirstily, then brushed my teeth. Momentarily, half the lights will be turned off. Snoring will soon commence, followed by nightmare screams, then the morning siren shortly after the sun has risen from the east. Fish will be served at the end of the day. Tomorrow was thankfully predictable.

Normal humans don't want to be slaves. Subconsciously, they don't want to be truly *free* either. Real freedom is actually quite daunting.

The phrase zi you zi zai came to mind. It suddenly made more sense than ever.

In Chinese, freedom $-zi\ you\ -$ is often expressed phrasally as $zi\ you\ zi\ zai\ -$ free and at ease - rather than $zi\ you$ alone. Yes, someone who can be at ease with his situation is free wherever he may be - in jail, in the office, at home, even when tied up. The trick is to be truly at ease regardless. Not easy.

'When I get out of this fucking hell hole, I'll stop at the nearest fucking cafe for a bowl of instant noodles with spam and egg, then go to Mong Kok for a good fuck!' One of the boys

appeared all excited about the future. As freedom approached, he bravely masked it with industrial noodles and discount intercourse, fun things which he knew well how to enjoy.

Yawn, time to sleep. Be at ease.

* * *

Mirage of Justice

At Tong Fuk, it occurred to me that freedom could be more intimidating than liberating. Deep down, well hidden in our subconscious, most of us don't really want it because we can't handle it, not the real thing anyway. We claim we adore freedom because we don't know we don't, and it's not cool to *not* love freedom, whatever it means. Though we may not know what freedom is, however, we can at least agree on what it isn't most of the time. Prisoners are indisputably not free.

Fairness is way trickier; it's controversial both ways. We can't agree on what's fair; nor can we agree on what *isn't*.

Justice is often a matter of opinion, an opinion which shifts with time, according to situation, experience, self-interest, and bias. Plus even if we concurred in what constitutes fairness and justice, we will never reach consensus on how they should be achieved. For while few would dispute that totally unrestricted freedom may descend into chaos and wipe out all sense of fairness, the means and degree of restriction are inevitably controversial, subjects of endless debates. In the end, everyone finds the final compromise unfair at least sometimes, under some circumstances.

Justice is also paradoxically unique and universal, intuitive and complex all at once.

Every community has some form of a code of justice going way back. Unfortunately, time, experience, and sophistication have not delivered progress. Every community has a justice system which is imperfect in the eyes of those it governs, and at least partly baffling to outsiders. These days, as the global population of progressive people increases, common sense has become secondary to lofty principles and untested ideologies, further confusing the already erratic evolution of justice. Sure, common sense alone clearly isn't enough to define or administer justice, but a legal system which defies common sense will never seem equitable to the majority. In short, humanity seems to be moving further away from universal justice after philosophers, rulers, politicians, academics, revolutionaries, and counter-revolutionaries have contemplated, deliberated, and experimented for millennia. Worse, as justice gains unprecedented complexity and sophistication over time, it might have become more arbitrary and controversial than ever.

Nevertheless, there remains in the human psyche a nagging dissatisfaction with inequities. Witnessing gross injustice disgusts us. It's our nature to demand fairness for ourselves and others, so long as fairness to others doesn't come at our own cost.

It was high time that some prisoner gave this dead-end issue a good thought in his plentiful spare time. I volunteered.

Confucius sagely warned that maldistribution is a more threatening social ill than general poverty. But human experience before and after him has shown that universal fairness is slippery, unattainable no matter how hard we try. Perhaps chasing after something we cannot adequately define is doomed to fail. Meanwhile, maldistribution appears to have worsened with increased affluence and heightened expectation. If Confucius was right, the world is very ill indeed.

According to surveys which are rapidly becoming obsolete, Americans are more ready than others to believe that 'life is fair.' This could be a reflection of blissful naivety, or an indication of relative satisfaction with a disproportionately *fair* share of global resources. Unfortunately, domestic distribution has failed to catch up. The rich-poor gap has grown out of control. At the same time, letting money do all the talking has eroded the work ethics which once underscored the traditional American spirit, and detached the moneyed caste from sweaty peasants of the twenty-first-century. A society in which wealth means political power is not different from a feudal state in essence.

Trying to conjure justice out of a mixture of powerful money and complex legislation is a new experiment. An over-reliance on legal technicality coupled with money driven lobbying has made the law book impossibly complex and amoral, even immoral, loaded with convoluted provisions tilting wordily towards the interests which sponsored its authorship. The law is now unnavigable without expensive lawyers, thereby undermining the original purpose of maintaining a general sense of fairness for *all*. The befuddled masses have been marginalised and disadvantaged. Social inequity has been effectively institutionalised.

Hong Kong's legal theatre remains reasonably sensible by comparison, but the worrying trend should not be overlooked.

For example, legal technicality seems to be gaining popularity among the lawyers I have talked with. Having a well defined and strictly followed procedure is of course desirable, but promoting it above all else, equating it to justice itself, would be ridiculous. Acquitting a felon who is guilty beyond doubt because of technicality is unfair, not progressive. If procedural compliance is all it takes to ensure justice, then computers would make better judges and prosecutors than humans. Perhaps they do in minor offences. But a competent judge remains the preferred option in cases which require discretion and compassion. The traditional Chinese legal spirit tries to balance fa, li, qing — letter of the law, reasonableness, discretion. In essence, this is also how the common law operates. Technicality should only be a part of the equation, not the determining factor.

Another legal tradition inherited from Hong Kong's colonial era is independence of the judiciary. The concept is functional enough — at least harmless — in mundane disputes. But to embrace it literally and absolutely will be naive and unproductive.

A totally independent judiciary can become literally above the law like Lords from the Dark Ages. Credible corruption allegations made against US Supreme Court Judges, for example, don't make it past the gossip columns of mainstream media, as there isn't any point in asking these ultimate judges to judge themselves. Is that fair? Regardless of the selection and

appointment mechanism, all judges must be accountable to the people and the law. In fact, they should be held to higher standards because of the honour and power society has bestowed upon them.

At the grimy political level, countries which advertise 'separation of power' have tacit understanding and latent communication means between the ostensibly independent power branches. Julian Assange, Meng Wan Zhou of Huawei, Frédéric Pierucci of Alstom are but a few well-known names which come to mind right away to illustrate the point. A truly 'independent' judiciary has never really existed when it comes to political cases, especially those involving a foreign state in geopolitical affairs. Otherwise, the appointment of US Supreme Court judges would be a sleep inducing bureaucratic process unworthy of the attention of excitable politicians. Being too literal with the slogan 'separation of powers' without understanding how it operates in the real world would be kind of stupid.

That said, the absolute majority of cases are simple and down-to-earth rather than political, requiring judges to understand everyday things rather than political scams and objectives. Unfortunately, the average judge seems rather isolated from down-to-earth reality.

For more than a century, we were told that foreign judges from faraway lands were *fairer* than local ones because they couldn't even speak the local language. Ignorance gave him the ability to judge without conflict of interest. This fallacious argument made as much sense as the medieval practice of asking celibate clergies to rule over family disputes.

These days, most judges are ethnically local. But many don't know how to take public transports or function in a lawful business environment. Negotiation, compromise, concession, and queuing for goods and services are alien to those who make legal judgements for a good living. Stanley's and Ringo's cases highlighted some typical but unmentionable deficiencies in the system. In my own experience, the magistrate demonstrated that he resided in a universe markedly different from my humble one. I wouldn't say which universe makes better sense. I'm merely stating my impression that a gaping cultural difference exists between us members of the masses and the average magistrate.

Before Flower Lounge, my contact with the law was superficial. I now understand a bit more, but not nearly enough to claim knowledge in this intricate and independent universe. I was however inspired to take note of the state of this sacrosanct practice during my unremitting spare time in Tong Fuk.

Back at the dorm, I was jotting down my playground thoughts while the boys played an alcohol-free drinking game.

The thuggish young man with a rose bouquet tattoo on his back had just lost two consecutive rounds. Downing two big mugs of water in five minutes was evidently more distressing to the stomach than alcohol.

In an ideal world (why am I using the cliched *ideal world* for reference, knowing that it doesn't exist, and never will?) success would be proportional to merits. But what appears meritorious to one may seem criminal to another...

'Not fucking fair!' screamed Rosie the Thug. He had just lost another round, and was quitting due to medical concerns.

After giving the subject of fairness due consideration all day, I had become more confused. The only insight I had managed so far was a no-brainer which everyone knew: It's impossible to be fair to everyone at all times.

Some might have regarded it a waste of time but I couldn't care less.

Does that mean fairness doesn't exist?

Apparently so.

Unless...unless there are multiple lifetimes? Once again, my mind ventured into forbidden areas.

Multiple lifetimes, from my pseudoscientific perspective, is infinitely more convincing than other afterlife tales such as feigning an everlasting smile next to the Almighty. Voltaire had a point there: Being born twice is no more surprising than being born once.

As far as we know, which isn't a lot in the big picture, things get transformed and moved around, converted from matter to energy and vice versa. Nothing is thoroughly taken out of existence. Can the unknown force which gives *life* to our bodies — transient assemblies of primordial carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, nitrogens et cetera which popped up with a Big Bang — be the only exception? Is it so unimaginable that this unknown life force is continual, transformed, and recirculated like everything else we can see or speculate in the universe? The concept of karma once seemed bizarre to me. Now it seems the most plausible and 'scientific' among all the blind guesses humanity has come up with.

Under this spiritual recycling assumption, justice looks different.

If I observe a stranger's life over a twenty-four-hour period, it may appear grossly unfair: He's done nothing all morning, yet a fat cheque arrives in the mail. What has he done to deserve that? Just as unbelievably, while enjoying a book and a glass of wine at home in the evening, not bothering anyone, the cops kick down the door and take him away. None of that makes sense.

But if I know his earlier history, the above events will seem more reasonable, even inevitable.

If there are multiple lifetimes, observing just one of them would be no less incomplete and out of context than spying on a stranger over a twenty-four-hour period. But if humans are not cosmically exceptional, then some form of transcendental karmic accounting system would be expected. Our accounts would be balanced down to the last penny, the final micron, like everything else. Only a matter of time.

Unfortunately, a multi-lifetime view will lead us to tenuous territories.

Karmic determinism has been used to rationalise heartless exploitation and caste enslavement. It may also lead to a fatalistic resistance against our fairness instincts in the present life. Even if true, therefore, karma should be rejected for political reasons.

I was stuck in a labyrinth without an exit.

Blinkering myself to just the present lifetime, I tried to explore alternative angles to interpret fairness.

The overall quality of life as experienced by the person living it is often overlooked. Wealth, power, and fame are commonly used to measure success. But whether due to personality, karma, or whatever, many hugely successful individuals are not remotely content, especially towards the final terrifying years, as illness, disillusionment, and loneliness sink in. On the other hand, some paupers live and die happy.

Money and power may be related, but happiness isn't. As happiness is arguably the ultimate goal, life is therefore fairer than it seems. Fair enough?

Not really.

To my surprise, most *See Hings* I had chatted with disagreed with my silly rationalisation. They, with a combined net worth not worth mentioning, actually thought more like Soros than my good self. In general, they believed that money is the solution to all problems, and problems make people unhappy. Since they had no money but plenty of problems, the obvious solution was to make as much of it as quickly as possible, in order to attain problem-free living and perpetual happiness. I believe this was a main reason why they were there at Tong Fuk.

When I then asked their views on justice instead, most just yawned. Perhaps they knew from experience that justice was biased against them. Always has been, always will be — so, let's talk about something else. They weren't bitter though. Like feudal peasants, acceptance was essential for survival and self-preservation. Only people with nothing better to do than eating and defecating would bother to think about the meaning of justice.

'You have money, you have justice, it's that fucking simple!' One Mr. See Hing had found it difficult to understand what was it that I didn't understand.

Following that simple logic, the most practical way to maximise personal justice is to make more money by hook or by crook. When desperate, even the highly intelligent take extremely stupid chances, giving clever lawyer Derek the impression that they're all idiots.

From the perspective of my fellow inmates, *hope* and *prudence* don't mix. Breaking the law brings money, therefore hope. Being prudent means life would be more stable and predictable, and they'd be predictably poor. Doesn't sound like a good choice. Heck, what the hell. Once they have ventured outside the law, they have to keep going. Turning back is difficult. Just keep going, whatever the consequence. Soldiers in the battlefield don't analyse the chance of getting shot.

More experienced *See Hings* try to beat the system the best they can until getting caught. Then they accept and rationalise. If they get an obviously unfair verdict or disproportionately stiff sentence, they shrug. 'Oh well, it's pure fucking bullshit this time, but I'd gotten away many times before,' wink wink. That was the mentality of the Car Thief at LCK. Receiving two parking tickets on a bad day after having parked illegally and gotten away with it for a whole month is obviously a good deal if one has a big heart, fair mind, and transcendental rationalisation skills.

Are money and justice as intimately related as they believe?

Unfortunately, the data seem to concur.

Using the USA as a learning example again, only about 2% (yes, two percent) of all convictions are the results of due process. The rest are reached through plea bargains. The reason is simple. The Attorney General has unlimited resources, most people don't. After a lengthy process, the average guy will rather plead guilty to end the ordeal quickly, especially if they have been remanded long enough; pleading guilty could mean going home next week. Otherwise...Even persons with means, such as Assange or Meng Wan Zhou, eventually signed some fuddled admission to get out of the situation.

What about civil cases? Well, if you're in a legal battle against Bill Gates or Soros, good luck, unless you're Elon Musk.

Enough. My mental rambling had given me a glimpse of an age-old phenomenon which appeared real, yet unreachable, like a mirage.

I closed the notebook and put justice away, happy that I had exercised a prisoner's prerogative and wasted a lot of time.

* * *

Think or Not ... here I am

Descartes said 'I think, therefore I am.' It made him famous. Had he not thought at all, chances are he would still have been, existentially speaking, though probably different, less aware, more akin to wild animals, dictated by basic instincts, swept along by karmic forces, too stupefied to realise or wonder why, but less vain. That's all.

Contemplation may not be an existential prerequisite as Monsieur Descartes suggested, but is very likely the primary distinction between man and beast. Only through deliberate thinking can humans deny, restrain, or indulge basic instincts and develop *human nature*, for better or for worse. Unfortunately, modern humans are becoming too preoccupied with chasing after nothing, thereby losing interest in trying to understand the purpose of this present existence. It doesn't have to be anything arcane or *philosophical*. Just a natural, reflexive, down-to-earth curiosity about why we are here — a curiosity which may mark us from wild beasts.

Paradoxically, humans exchanging insults often call each other 'animal' while we are all indisputably members of the Animal Kingdom. It's a bit like growling dogs calling each other dog. The Chinese are a tad more technically correct in this regard. They berate their adversaries as someone 'lacking humanity', or being worse than wild beasts. The biological fact that we are all animals isn't denied, but the implication that humans are a superior breed is clear. This assumption, often taken for granted, actually lacks support. On average, compared with humans, wild animals have stronger legs, sharper claws, greater stamina, better eyesight, more sensitive noses, and mightier jaws. Wild beasts are superior to humans in numerous ways.

Some may suggest that physically inferior humans are superior to wild animals in terms of moral qualities? The evidence isn't clear on that either. Within the Animal Kingdom, we are arguably the most vain, and unnecessarily cruel.

Take eating for example. Carnivores eat other animals uncooked, noisily. That's undoubtedly beastly. But humans also consume sushi and carpaccio raw, albeit with wasabi and condiments. When it comes to carnivorous consumption, humans can in fact be more vicious and cold-blooded. I bet hyaenas won't clip the beaks off chickens (even if they could), then jam-pack them in multi-level cages to tap bluntly at industrial fodders with hormonal additives their entire short lives before slaughtering, labelling, marketing, and wasting. Alfred, this chicken tastes like wet paper. Throw it out, please. Hyaenas would just eat, not waste or make pretentious complaints.

Within the teetering Kingdom Animalia, only humans, linen napkins tucked under chins, would discard perfectly good food, or gorge when there's no need to. More abhorrently, human consumption of fellow animals is increasingly driven by vanity rather than hunger or nutritional needs. When expensive carcasses appear on the table in fancy arrangements, *Homo consumers* take photos to show off in social media rather than dig in.

Flower Lounge Think or Not...here I am

What is humanity then? What marks us from our wild beast cousins?

After much thinking behind bars, I came to the conclusion that *deliberate thinking* is perhaps the only fundamental difference, assuming that wild animals do not consciously engage in indepth reasoning.

Through contemplation, we voluntarily control our basic instincts, gradually developing something that can be identified as humanness. Like it or not, it's at least unique among animals, and might have once given us a critical survival advantage. Ironically, some modern *Homo sapiens* are trying to reverse this one and only advantage we have over other animals by indulging and glorifying basic instincts over thoughtfulness.

Though we often think down the wrong path, our minds must be given credit for trying to compete and struggle with basic instincts rather than letting them dictate our desires and actions, thereby making us *human*.

The Correctional Services Department doesn't actively correct anything. But it does provide an environment which stimulates contemplation. In a harsh way, the prison — at least the one I was in — is an 'excellent' place for reflection and meditation. It has been said that the city centre can be more conducive to enlightenment than a Himalayan cave. Up there in the Himalayas, it's easy to doze off. Down here in the midst of the ugly urban flux, something would be constantly bugging us, highlighting the merits of transcending this highly irritating dimension.

The prison is at the far end of this irritating dimension. The noise, smoke, people, and situation in Flower Lounge collide to create a thought provoking mess, forcefully promoting existential contemplation. The ineluctable burdens of life have been temporarily lifted from a prisoner's shoulders. There's always food on the table. Rent is free. Work pressure has dissipated. Nobody cares about appearance. Family problems are out of reach. It's a place with bare minimum facade, free of the common wearies of life.

Indeed, from talking with the *See Hings*, I was left with the impression that most of them spent more time to consider their situation, the future, and life in general, when jailed. Once freed, they'd lose the time and energy to muse on stressful reality. Life had to go on, ruthlessly. Thinking led to hesitation — not a productive attitude for criminals. Only in prison was abstraction a welcome distraction.

* * *

Epilogue

The Court of Appeal made a long story very short on the 9th of May, 2012.

In about fifteen minutes, His Lordship agreed that John and I had reasonable grounds to appeal. *The Company* put up a hefty bail to purchase our provisional and conditional freedom. Towards the end of the same year, we won the appeal. Incredibly, the Department of Justice took the case to the Court of Final Appeal. Our lawyers were astonished, and smiled. We won the final appeal in the summer of 2013 after another brief hearing. That was it. I never returned to Tong Fuk.

The DOJ had spent a lot of tax money in vain to keep another jurisdiction 'clean'. Ironically, more than a decade on, *the Company* is still operating in Macau with the same joint venture partner, servicing the same government contract which has been successfully renewed competitively several times in the interim. The Macau government has found nothing untoward after their own investigation.

Some say imprisonment enriches one's life. These could be the words of romanticists or idiots who have never even visited a prison. True, there are surprisingly positive lessons one could take away from any experience if it's embraced with an open mind. But not everyone is in a position to deal with trying circumstances, openminded or otherwise. In my own case, support from my family, friends and colleagues made a pivotal difference. The luminary counsel *the Company* recruited from London for the appeal was also a persuasive factor in our tug of war for favourable justice.

Duration could have made a difference also.

I spent a total of seventy days in jail, approximately the length of time I whimsically told Fai that I would like to get a taste of the Flower Lounge. I wonder how I may look back on my time behind bars now if I had to serve out the original sentence in full. Time could have intensified the experience, or numbed the senses, and changed my perspective accordingly. Well, every turn in life leaves behind a similarly futile wonderment. The unknowable is best left to unfold in one of the infinite multiverses, staging a different outcome unbeknown to us.

In any event, in retrospect, I wouldn't want to have missed the experience and many of the people I met in Flower Lounge. I am indebted to the many *See Hings* and guards whose names I should not mention. They confirmed that the paranoid Guardian Angel was but a shadow in my heart. I have since exorcised it, and feel lighter.

Coincidentally, as I write this epilogue, the calendar says 29 February 2024, exactly twelve years since Day One in Flower Lounge. It has taken much longer than expected to finish this book. Being autobiographical in nature makes me self-conscious. And instead of facilitating accurate recollection, the three books of diaries actually made me uptight about every incomplete detail and delusive 'fact', until it dawned on me that the only place where absolute

clarity exists in life is fiction. In *Midlife Triad*, *Gollum's Demon*, and *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, I had let fiction fill in the gaps of a tattered reality. Why not here?

Finally, it's time to give my warmest heartfelt thank you to my wife Satu and daughters Claire (who's bald spot closed up beautifully after the appeal) and Saara, who never managed to visit the work-camp. They helped me lull yet another tempest into a gentle breeze by being their usual selves — strong, calm, supportive, and loving. I'm also grateful for the unwavering support from my buddy Fai and *the Company*. Without them, Flower Lounge could have been unnecessarily stressful.

29th February 2024, Hong Kong

Glossary of Cantonese terms:

Bai Shan (grave sweeping) — prison visits

Chor Fa Tang — to sit in a Flower Lounge

Dew Lay Lo Mo — a common Cantonese swearword

Dorg Gang (neck measurement) — to commit suicide by hanging

Fan Tong (dining hall) — the Common Room

Guo Gai (cross boundary) — transfer to another prison

Ng goi — thank you

See Hing (trade brother) — how inmates address each other

Zharm Zhong — stand up meditation