

## The Future

---

---

### *Howard Park*

It was almost two years since he bought the tickets; more than a month after he backed out of a deal to sell them. An aging Taiwanese couple answered the ad in the paper, and when he changed his mind, right in front of them, they thought he was asking for more money. Roger tried to apologize, but they just offered higher and higher prices. *You're not even Chinese*, they said on their way out.

At the time, it seemed like a churlish retort, a little silly even. But now, on the sweaty verge of the monsoon season, he wasn't so sure. Roger put his suitcase down on the cobblestones and looked up at his hotel. A cloud of signs, wires, and antennas hovered above him, blocking the sky out completely, and an uneven column of white neon letters descended from it like a lightning bolt: *Hong Kong Paradise*. Next to the "P," he could see a woman's face over the lip of a shallow balcony, red hair flowing over her shoulder like Rapunzel's. Roger studied her foreshortened chin and jaw for a minute, then turned around.

Across the street, a rusting hulk that might have been an apartment building towered over him. Its exposed concrete surface was crisscrossed by clotheslines and studded with teetering air conditioners. An eight-lane expressway came so close to the side of the building that the windows there opened only halfway before touching the guard rail.

On the ground, pedestrians moved in a thick current, forming a kind of channel between makeshift shops and street vendors. Occasionally a car honked and inched its way through them. Glowing puffs of steam and smoke erupted from every vent, and Roger had the feeling that he'd somehow been sucked into a Hieronymous Bosch painting.

A tin cart was stationed nearby, with half a dozen people in a line beside it. One of them, who'd had his head and both hands stuck through the serving window, popped out and issued a belch of a laugh. A few feet away, turtles paddled listlessly in a plastic bucket labeled "KRAUT." A shriveled old woman hissed conspiratorially at Roger, then slid the cover from a second bucket, revealing some kind of marine invertebrate he could not name. Next to her, a man in a pin-striped baseball shirt waved his hands enigmatically over a natty array of electronic components: circuits designed to defeat video copy

protection cradled in a basket of woven bamboo leaves, sweatshop DRAM in lacquerware boxes. The odor of cooking grease drifted past, tinged with those of sewage and factory antiseptics. Further down the street, a group of men wearing stained coveralls sat under a sheet of blue weatherproofing that served as an awning, while a girl in a lab coat and red spangled miniskirt administered glaucoma tests to them.

Roger picked up his suitcase and went inside.

The lobby was cramped, just a strip of carpet between the sliding doors and a high marble counter. There was no one in sight. Then a man in a scruffy Eton jacket poked his head up from behind the desk. Roger interrupted him just as he started to say something in Chinese, "Last name is Kim, K-I-M."

"Pardon me, sir, I'll check." His colonial accent unnerved Roger, and he had to stop himself from staring.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see that name in our register." Roger began to stare again, uncomprehending, then remembered that the room had been reserved under his ex-girlfriend's name.

He winced. "Right. Try Farman, F-A-R-M-A-N."

The attendant typed something into a computer, placed a key card on the counter, and announced, "You're in room 51."

"Lift's over there," he added.

The fifth floor hallway was lit by a pair of wall-mounted fluorescents that flickered on and off unpredictably. There was an open window where it turned a corner, and Roger stuck his head through it. He came out on a light well filled with refuse to about the middle of the third floor and closed at the top by a grate. It smelled smoky.

After a moment of disorientation, he found his room, threw his bag on the floor next to the bed, and slept on top of the covers, not bothering to change.

\* \* \*

From Roger's window, he saw an angular, stepped courtyard and, between a pair of taller buildings, the harbor. In that sliver of blue, he counted fourteen boats: tugs, trawlers, junks, and an oil tanker. It didn't seem possible to navigate in such a pinch, but the boats slipped past each other in a confident, albeit ungraceful, dance.

It was the dance of capitalism, a delirious, unceasing hustle for goods, services, and money. Air conditioners assembled in Cambodia from components made in Macau and sheet metal stamped in India found their way here, to this harbor, so they could be strapped down next to barrels of polyurethane wood sealant and salt-stained sacks of millet and rice, poled across the harbor onto a waiting container, and shipped to consumers in Singapore. From there,

the trip would be repeated in reverse, a steady trickle of cash flowing back downstream, merging with other trickles into a surging wave of profit.

Tomorrow, when China regained possession of Victoria Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, Roger would get his first chance to witness a bona fide Historical Event: all the boats, with their air conditioners and sealant and rice, would not stop. They would just keep on moving, and an entire city would change hands without war.

Roger showered slowly in the small, ultra-modern bathroom. It appeared to have been cast from a single dollop of hard plastic, pale green and slightly marbled. From the way it was dropped into the corner, without caulk or even plaster, he judged it to be a recent retrofit. The door was designed to fold up like a fan, and there were small signs above every fixture in English and Chinese that warned not to drink the water. Turning on the faucet, Roger decided to trust the local advice: It ran red for half a minute then, sprinkling like a kinked garden hose, gray.

It was past noon when he left the hotel. Except in the most general terms, he had no idea where he was, where he was going, or how to get there from here. Eventually, Roger found his way onto a busy thoroughfare lined with bars and restaurants. Traffic, instead of sharing a single sheet of asphalt, was divided into separate surfaces for cars, buses, and bicycles, interspersed with raised sidewalks, bus stops, curved aluminum rails. The tangle of signs and posters here was even more bewildering than before. There seemed to be more languages involved, sometimes three or four to a panel.

As he passed under a knot of unlit neon tubes, a sign on the other side slid into view. Roger could see a backlit row of square yellow-tinted photographs along its lower edge. Each photograph was harshly focused on a girl's raised buttocks, pale and over-exposed. Roger took another step, and the tubes, lifting like a stage curtain, revealed four more rows of pictures.

It took him almost an hour to find a decent-looking Vietnamese noodle shop. *Phô* was one of the few things his ex-girlfriend, Brittney, liked about Chinatown, and for three months after he introduced her to it, that was what they ate every Saturday afternoon. He never told her he was allergic to coriander.

Roger hunched over the empty bowl, tonguing the scalded skin on the roof of his mouth. He remembered the sense of explaining that made him invite her to a Vietnamese restaurant on their first date. Alien in the land of the whites, he'd learned by then to cherish the act of narration. *Here is the plum sauce; here is the chili paste. You mix them together.* It could not matter that he wasn't Vietnamese. What starts as a simple need to communicate becomes a skill, an aptitude for storytelling. The explanation becomes a coherent, believable explanation, a confabulation, then a caricature and, finally, a fetish object.

Not all at once. It was never obvious which explanations were going to be difficult for his audience to assimilate, which would be too jarring. But after several tellings, the bad ones get weeded out. The teller gets tired. He'd rather put on the show everyone expects—cold, meditative, delicate. This is the language they understand.

This is the reason he can't smile at a picture of a naked girl.

Roger stared at his reflection in the chromed card slot of a public phone. It took him a few moments to notice that there was a crabby-looking man waiting in line behind him.

"You going to use that?" The man gestured as if he weren't sure whether Roger understood English.

"No—I—can't remember the number," he said, stepping away.

While the man talked, Roger fished his passport out of a hip pocket and flipped it open to a business card. "John H. Leung, Attorney-at-Law" was stamped in glossy letters on one side; on the other, scrolling vertically, were three large Chinese characters and a bunch of smaller ones.

John was an ex-roommate of a friend that he and Brittney had had in common. They'd met three or four times before at parties and engaged in exaggerated banter, mostly on the subject of architecture. Roger remembered that he seemed to cherish art in the way only an unfulfilled lawyer can: he read architecture criticism for pleasure.

After five rings, an answering machine picked up, John's voice sounding peeved and remote. Roger clicked the hook down anxiously and held his finger there for ten seconds before trying his office number. The strange dial tone and ringing sounds reminded him even more strongly than the unfamiliar smells that he was in a foreign country.

"Morrison and Foerster, John Leung speaking."

"John, it's Roger Kim."

There was a brief silence, and for a moment, Roger had the feeling that he'd made some kind of mistake.

"How'd you know I was in the office?"

"I tried you at home . . ." His getaway from the answering machine would no longer be so clean. He blinked. Then, after another pause, John's voice softened, shedding most of its British accent, which he had always been able to do at will.

"How are you? Where are you?"

"I'm wandering around Kowloon. At the corner of Hankow and . . . I'm not sure this cross-street has a name. How are you?"

"Well, these are interesting times, and you know what the Chinese say about that. Listen, I'm about to get out of here. It'd probably be simpler if we just meet somewhere on your side of the harbor."



The bar that John suggested was located in a double-height rotunda at the top of a thirty-story hotel. Armature-mounted plate glass extended from floor to ceiling, through three-quarters of its circumference.

Roger sank into a couch, soft leather engulfing him like sand, and tried to remember what his guidebook had said about the restaurant that encircled the raised bar area. He'd spent a whole weekend once going through the gray newsprint pages at the back and underlining all the places he wanted to eat in before they became exiled from the food-producing apparatuses of the West. The book disappeared, though, when Brittney moved out.

Under the potted palms, in the narrow beam of a halogen spotlight, Roger sat and wondered whether she had really mistaken it for her own. He was staring straight at the elevator doors when John came in. By coincidence, they were both wearing khakis and dark blue T-shirts, a fact that caused John to halt in a playful double-take before proceeding. From a distance, they might have been indistinguishable.

Closer up, the differences were considerable. John had a gaunt, triangular face, thin lips, and a delicate nose. His dark brown eyes, nearly black, were round, shell-shocked. Roger stood up to shake his hand.

"What've you got there?"

"Beer."

"I think I'll have one too," he said absently, then, turning to the waiter, "Same for me, please."

They sat next to the window for a few minutes, talking idly; then came the inevitable: "How, by the way, is Brit?" Arching his eyebrow and rounding out the "hooww," as if conceding the trickiness of the question.

"Well, I'm here alone, aren't I?"

"I know you broke up; I meant, have you seen her? Do you talk?"

"Yeah, once in a while. To tell you the truth, it's still kind of strange."

"Strange?"

"Strange. Yeah." Roger shrugged and sipped his beer.

John switched topics. "You know the tall one out there, right?" He indicated the highest point on the Hong Kong skyline, not counting the bowl-shaped oddity perched atop The Peak.

"Yup." It was the Bank of China building.

"And the little silver one next to it."

"Yup." The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank.

"Ever seen the insides?"

"Seen pictures . . ."

"Oy, the irony!" he said, clapping the back of his hand to his forehead in a mock swoon, "The architect hasn't seen the architecture!"

"Well, I'm not an architect any more. Not an architecture student, I mean."

"What?" John's face darkened, then immediately relaxed, expressionless.

"I dropped out. Last year."

He smiled again, expansive but a little forced, and said, sighing, "We have to go see it anyway. You hungry at all?"

There was a tiny new sushi bar further down the peninsula that John had been meaning to try for months. It struck Roger as senseless, surreal almost, to fly ten thousand miles to the southern rim of China and eat Japanese food, but he kept the thought to himself.

The situation reminded him of something he'd read two or three semesters ago in Theory class. It was a Marxist essay that accused capitalism of "effacing national characteristics," rendering German architecture indistinguishable from Dutch or Austrian by fusing them into an international Modernist conspiracy.

That was Frankfurt, 1927. In Hong Kong, 1997, the opposite was happening: "national characteristics," or at least national affectations, were being sharpened, lifted from the murk of historical reality and packaged for immediate brand recognition. The imaginary difference between *yakisoba* and *lo mein* was becoming more pronounced, even as the real differences between Hong Kong and Tokyo, or San Diego, or Nairobi, were disappearing.

"National characteristics," "historical reality"—terms that Brit, tossing her head in a gesture of obliviousness, had coolly refused to accept, though it appeared finally that Roger had managed to persuade her. Five or six months after the breakup, he received an anonymously re-routed e-mail message that contained nothing but the transcribed text of a journal article. The article compared white Americans' increasingly rapacious consumption of ethnic food with the cannibalism of Jeffrey Dahmer, the sado-masochistic relationship between the killer and his victims with the canonization of "the Asian-American experience" in films, novels, and magazines. Real cultural artifacts, it turns out, make for poor eating and have to be reduced to classifiable bits and pieces first. Here are bruised Thai short ribs, Laotian biceps marinated in soy sauce and rice wine, minced heart of Korean boyfriend.

Once, when he brought the article up in conversation, his brother-in-law snapped, "Look, you evidently like women who have nice legs; I like women who happen to be Asian. That all right with you?" As if asking permission. As if the living terror that threatened to swallow him whole were nothing more scary than a pair of "nice legs," no more substantial than the difference between Kato and the Green Hornet.

"Yup," he had answered, "all right with me."

The crowd on the street had become thicker and more purposeful during the time Roger and John had been up in the bar. Now it seemed to be overtaking them, the curious picking up speed, becoming urgent, choleric. By the time he saw the first picket, Roger knew it was a political demonstration.

They entered a narrow, high-walled square, suddenly surrounded by banners, hand-painted signs, and violent calligraphy. The protest's epicenter seemed to be further down the street at the other end of the plaza, but the mob was already crushingly close.

"What do the banners say?"

John steered him toward an unoccupied space between a TV news van and a parked car. Then, looking over his shoulder around the corner of the van, he said, "Kau tsut yik heng, uh, resist going backwards—no going back."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know, but that's the Xinhua—the New China News Agency over there."

"They're protesting a news agency?"

"It's the unofficial Chinese embassy." When Roger responded only with a half-hearted "um," John turned back to give him a look of stupefaction.

"There being no *official* Chinese embassy."

Although the restaurant was no more than ten blocks away, it took them almost half an hour, fighting their way through the dense brake of bodies, to get there. Roger was slowed down even further by paranoia: with his hands in his pockets defending passport and wallet, navigation became difficult, clumsy. He exhaled in relief when they arrived.

The building was a multi-purpose commercial low-rise of a type rarely encountered in the U.S., on account of fastidious zoning and fire-safety laws. The bays shared a concrete frame and a semi-public, semi-enclosed circulation core, but were built out separately and connected independently to metered utilities. One of the bays, wedged between a Jindo Fur Salon and an Ann Taylor, contained something that looked remarkably like a mobile home.

"He's an art dealer," John said, pointing. "Keeps his office up there."

The entryway led onto a kind of courtyard fashioned from steel cable, mylar, and brushed aluminum struts anodized to the color of burnt chestnuts. It looked more like the inside of an airplane engine than a shopping center. At the back, past a daisy chain of angular heat convection membranes, was an antique cage-door elevator.

John got in and pressed the button for the third floor. Roger, following, noticed that "3" apparently meant the third floor above ground level—what he would have called the fourth floor—and that there was no button marked "4."

"How come there's no fourth floor?"

"Huh? Oh, rhymes with death. In Mandarin, 'four' rhymes with 'death.'"

The restaurant was tiled in black, and ancient oval-screen television tubes hung above the sushi bar, illuminating it with static. Ultraviolet lights in corners and behind vases made the waiters' white uniforms glow. Like apparitions, they hovered behind the seats, one to a pair. Tiny Sapporo and Asahi logos were stitched onto the front tapers of their vests.

"This must be the place," Roger chirped.

John smiled at him blankly and wiped his hands and chin with a hot washcloth. Then the waiter bowed and said something in Japanese. John responded in the same language.

"He says they're no longer taking cash here."

In spite of its conspicuously unreasonable prices, the place was packed. Half a dozen shaggy-looking sushi chefs bustled behind the counter, exchanging raucous jokes with the customers. Everyone seemed to be drunk. Roger gave John a quizzical look and they agreed without speaking that a bottle of *sake* was needed. When it arrived, a party of Filipino golfers seated down the bar noisily offered them a toast. The waiters, with an equanimity descended straight from Buddhist monks, smiled impassively through it all.

"Feels like a dry run for the end of the millennium," Roger noted.

The chirashi-zushi he ordered was huge, full of fish he'd never seen before. Before he could dig in, though, John raised his glass.

"The undiscovered country," he said.

"The future," Roger answered, in his most dramatic voice.

They both laughed, clinked glasses, and drank.

"So did you go back to that rinky-dink firm of yours?"

"Heck no," he replied, hoping bravado might deflect the sinking feeling he had about the direction their conversation had turned.

"What've you been doing then?"

"Took an office job."

John frowned but said nothing. They understood each other now: he'd taken a job as a secretary, possibly a "Document Production Specialist." John's disapproval, he knew, had less to do with slipping a few rungs down the socioeconomic ladder than with opting for the easy way out, giving up on the cognitively dissonant trope of a powerful Asian male.

Actually, it was a good job. The hours were short, occupied mostly with Pynchon and Mann, and the bullshit level was low.

His co-workers had felt a little threatened at first, their most fundamental assumptions about education and its relationship to work—"career"—cast starkly into doubt. They groped; they stammered trying to reconcile the idea of

Roger the Ivy Leaguer with his evidently low opinion of money, power, and the American Dream.

Within a week, though, the other idea of Roger—Roger the passive, impotent chinaman—had won out. As a mythical figure, it was more robust, cleaved to the existing ideological terrain more readily. There was some bitterness in him, for sure, over the predictable outcome. But below that, like the scent of rotting flesh, sweet, overpowering, was an unmistakable sense of relief. It didn't feel so much like a losing battle on this side of the great middle-class divide.

"How about you? What've you been doing?" Roger asked, sounding abrupt and a little maniacal. John raised an eyebrow and grimaced, then started laughing a low, rhythmic laugh.

"You're a funny guy, Roger." John poured more *sake* for both of them and downed his without waiting. "Well, let's see. The firm's been busy. Everyone thought we were going to scale back, but of course we did the opposite. Our caseloads have just been getting heavier and heavier. Plus, we're up to our necks in bizarre cases that nobody knows how to deal with. It's true, everything's going to be different."

"Why didn't you leave when you had the chance?"

"Why did you come when you had a chance to bail?" John shot back. Roger felt his teeth grit.

"I'm not staying." He wondered whether John knew about the ad he'd put in the paper, and if so, how. They looked at each other balefully.

John put his chopsticks down and poured himself another drink. Then, still holding the bottle, he indicated Roger's glass, watched him toss it back, and refilled it.

"The fact is, Roger, China belongs to the Chinese. And Chinese, including me—including all the Chinese in Hong Kong—belong to China. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going to happen here. What'd you think you were going to see, anyway?"

Roger looked around the restaurant. There was a man wearing a turban at the far end of the bar, but no white people. "I don't know yet," he said.

The rest of the meal was more subdued, the two of them slowly pulling into line behind the other drunken diners. When it was over and they emerged from the restaurant, the sky had reddened to a deep bronze. A sunset crossing to the island seemed unavoidable, fated.

They made the trip in a kind of ferryboat. The fans built into its top were broken, and the cabin was filled with a sweet, metallic scent that reminded Roger of lychee nuts.

It's paint remover," John told him. "These boats are all having their insignia removed."

They found seats next to a team of Malaysians in rowing uniforms and looked at the curved plastic advertising panels that ringed the compartment just above the windows. Rolex watches and dried tiger penises. 532-megahertz Pentium II's and acupuncturists and Coca-Cola. The black water slapping the hull of the ferry was choked with floating aerosol cans and foam packing strips. Ahead, skyscrapers shone like constellations. Roger could still pick out the silvered aluminum trusses of Norman Foster's Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, lambent in the fading sunlight.

And above it, almost exactly, Terry Farrell's Peak Redevelopment Project, a freakish cross between a blood-stained Pagan altar and the monumental entrance gate to the Forbidden City. Clearly the product of an ego gone berserk. Now, standing at the crease between light and darkness, it really looked as if streaks of lightning should flash down from the heavens and touch the points of its giant bowl.

"Building is not the same as Architecture," Roger was surprised to learn in his sophomore year of college. Architecture stems from a conceptual grammar, the grammar from an artistic tradition, the tradition from a common history. The history unfolds the same way every time: the Parthenon, the Pantheon, then Hagia Sophia, Chartres cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore—a canon, undoubtedly—and "Architecture" is revealed as a strictly local phenomenon.

But then Terry Farrell has the brilliant idea to take a safari into the inscrutable Orient, dig up some ancient-looking relics, and cart them back to British Museum, where they've been promised a spot next to the Elgin Marbles. Now everything can be part of the artistic tradition, and architects can frolic in trashy "references" to anything from the brass temple of the Tokharoi to the yurt villages of Ulan Bator.

Roger sat that way, elbows on his knees, until it gradually dawned on him that John was falling asleep in his seat. He shook him awake and asked whether he always worked on Sundays.

"Usually," John replied groggily.

"Then why were you so weird when I called there today?"

John shot him an embarrassed smile, then lowered his eyes. His hand was resting on the edge of the plastic seat, and the ring on his middle finger rattled against it from the vibration of the engine.

"Actually, I was cleaning out my desk. I resigned last month." John looked up at him again, earnestly this time. "I wanted to make tomorrow my last day."

The boat began to slow, and the rattling stopped.

"It's a pretty weird situation for everyone," John said, getting up. Roger followed him out of the cabin and over a gangplank.



The terminal opened onto a public park jammed with tourists. Roger recognized it from pictures: Statue Square, and beyond, Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. Overhead, the sky faded from mottled, dusty blue to black, and the plaza sank into the greenish glow of the Bank's exterior lights.

John pointed to a boxy colonial building on their left. "That's the old courthouse. Where the legislative council meets . . . used to meet." Its ribbed dome was circled by floodlights. Below, unilluminated, the entrance was cordoned off, and police officers stood guard on the steps. Moving further into the park, Roger saw several olive-drab buses parked on a walkway behind a kiosk and soldiers in black uniforms forming rows beside them.

"What's all the security for?" he asked.

John shrugged. "Expecting a protest?"

Vendors shouted at them as they walked past. All of them seemed to be selling T-shirts that celebrated the end of British tyranny, and some of them, hedging their bets, sold T-shirts that bemoaned the end of democracy as well. There were caps, pins, flags, stickers, cards, earrings, posters, mugs, and six-foot-tall inflatable Godzillas bearing the words "Hong Kong 1997." As a marketing strategy, the transfer of ownership was irreproachable.

Roger let himself be carried along by the flow of the crowd. A swirl pulled him past three-fourths of a string quartet, reading Scarlatti from old, smelly scores. Next to them, a pair of competing caricaturists who exchanged vicious comments about each other as they drew; shell games, sword swallowers, fortune tellers of every conceivable stripe—then an eddy, a sudden clearing. The lens of a television camera gaped at him, and a young woman in a tawny linen pantsuit asked something in Chinese. John was nowhere in sight. She poked her microphone at him. Roger hesitated, then in a slow, deliberate voice declared, "I'm an American."

"Pardon me," she said, her voice supernaturally clear and perfect, and motioned her cameraman toward an unsightly old man standing nearby. Roger's face flushed, and he tried to back away from the reporter but found himself wedged between an overweight Burmese man and his family.

Before he could decide how to escape with a minimum of further embarrassment, there was a tap on his shoulder. It was John, cocking his head toward the far end of the square. Roger felt an inexplicable surge of anger and elbowed his way roughly through the Burmese family.

John, perhaps, sensed this and started toward the Bank without saying anything. As they pressed their way through, turning sideways to avoid drunken teenagers and old ladies throwing trancelike fits, the composition of the crowd began to change.

By the time they arrived at the street, closed to vehicular traffic, it had bled into another crowd, more sedate, gathered below the Bank. They appeared

to be waiting in front of a huge sign, the upper portion of which Roger could see was written in Chinese. John stopped short.

"What's it say?" Roger asked.

John cleared his throat. "Withdrawals from individual accounts have been suspended until July 15. Patrons are, uh, requested to forgive the inconvenience."

"What are all these people doing here then?"

John turned and looked at him with an expression of distaste. "They're trying to close their accounts."

The broad, messy line was immobile and, craning his neck, Roger could see why. The storm shutters below the second-floor lobby were closed and a battery of guards faced the crowd, arms crossed, from behind it.

"Well, I guess this is about as close as we're going to get to Sir Norman. There's this great catenary membrane above the entry level there—"

John's description was interrupted by a muffled gasp spreading out from the direction of the square. Roger spun around, confused. Then, following the gazes of the people in front of him, he saw a man in a loose white shirt climbing the flagpole in front of the courthouse. The Union Jack was at half mast, signaling the upcoming transfer of power, but the man did not reach it. He was dragged down by a police officer and flung to the ground. Other policemen formed a ring, some facing in, some out, and at least one of them had drawn his truncheon. The mood turned instantly volatile. Roger saw nothing more, but he heard John say, "Let's get out of here."

He felt himself being pulled by the arm. People were moving in all directions. He nearly stumbled over someone who had fallen at a bend in the curb. Just as he regained his balance, a heavy blow fell on his shoulder, but he did not stop. John led him around a corner onto a less congested street, then let go and began to run.

Roger halted, bewildered, and watched him run to the end of the block. There, he slapped the door of an empty taxicab until its driver stood up from a trio of old men who'd been squatting on the sidewalk, smoking. Roger jogged up and got into the cab just as the engine was starting.

"I need a drink," John rasped.

Unsure whether they had just made a narrow escape, Roger looked idly at the driver in the rear-view mirror. His face was dark and splotchy, and when he parted his lips, Roger noticed that he had no teeth. Then the cab filled with the buzzing orange light of the tunnel lamps and the mirror turned black.

"I know a place," Roger said.



The sign thrusts out into the street, five feet above them. Five rows of pieces of women, presenting themselves. The raw seriality eliminates any characteristic that might have served to distinguish one girl from another. The form of a commodity totalizing, dictating the contents of a human life.

On the sidewalk, there is shouting, drinking, puking, fighting. It is not much different inside. A long hallway littered with junk, things that had been people. The concrete walls are painted black with goldish flecks like the hood of a hot rod. The hall ends at a steel door framed by an elaborately painted arch.

Through the door, a highly Orientalized red and gold podium. A misshapen old man stands behind it and a pair of heavily-muscled bouncers on either side. Tonight, each patron is required to leave a credit card at the door before entering. Tonight, there will be a very special show.

A crushed velvet curtain parts onto a low, wide space, windowless, with exposed metal rafters. In the center, under a string of painfully bright full-spectrum lasers, a kind of runway. Its corners are edged with tiny flame-shaped lightbulbs. A very young girl, fifteen maybe, marches in circles at its foot, shedding the layers of a motorcycle outfit. At the room's periphery, purple lights, cages, other girls dancing inside them. The music is loud but concentrated below the audible range.

Arranged in ragged files like soldiers, the spectators are silent, faceless. They do not hoot or whistle. They do not wave dollar bills. They look as if they've been here for ages, suckling, gathering dust.

The girl is down to a lacy black bra, superfluous on her flat chest, and a pair of spike-heeled leather hip boots. She puts three fingers into her mouth, sucks them desperately. Her hips move with a will of their own; wet fingers tame them, slide through the downy hairs of her pubis and into the small, bright opening. A sound, somewhere between a gasp and a sigh, escapes her.

"Oh God," says John.

The girls keep coming, in different costumes, different hairstyles, the same girl in different sizes and colors. For hours, the girls keep coming. Then the music snaps off and the lights dim. In the lengthening silence, the audience starts to murmur.

Without fanfare, two women step onto the runway. One, a svelte, wide-eyed Chinese; the other, a gamine blonde. They both wear black spaghetti-strap shifts, black stockings, black heels. Unconventional in the sense that there is little to take off. A wailing echo radiates from the speakers, softly at first, then rising in volume and density until the sound, like a hundred distant sirens, begins to gel, make motion difficult.

But they do move. They move together and apart, fondling each other's breasts, kissing each other's nipples, swollen and clearly visible through the gauzy fabric.

"The tanks should be rolling across the border right about now," John says dully.

Roger closes his eyes and imagines the columns of infantry at the starting line. It's the first running of the Hong Kong Marathon, but the runners all have zipper scars on their foreheads and pegs in their necks. They stomp into the city, crushing the most obvious remnants of British imperialism along the way. Something common to immigrants, foreigners.

Like his father, the Chinese are pursued by an unrelenting need to eliminate the traces of the past, a history in chintzy lamps and used cars. Like him, they will discard every relict memory, cast down every idol and replace it with a new one.

But they will not disturb the deep-laid machinery of capitalism.

When he opens his eyes again, the blonde is on her knees, head to the floor. Her thighs and buttocks are spread wide, and the Chinese makes a show of putting her tongue into the liver-colored crack. Their shifts are pulled up to their waists, but it's obvious that stripping is not the main attraction.

For the first time, it occurs to him that there's something wrong about the blonde. Something about her movements, her poses. The thought crosses his mind, briefly, that she's a man in drag, but the evidence of her glistening organ is clear.

Before he can figure it out, the two women sit up, kneeling, and face each other. The music is making it hard to breathe. They put their lips together; their tongues writhe in the hollow between them. With both hands, they hold each other's faces, palms flat against the jaw and cheekbones. He knows what it is now.

At the same time and without warning, each woman peels a thin rubbery mold from her partner's face. The molds are shaped like continents, their edges irregular. They aren't even symmetrical. As the music reaches a final, booming cadence, they stand and slide off their wigs. The blonde is not a blonde; she's a brunette, an Asian. The Chinese is not a Chinese; she looks Nordic, fair-haired. Roger stands up stiffly, concentrates on the scissoring motion of his legs, the swinging of his arms. The room spins, but his trajectory seems straight enough. It shoots through a gaggle of Indonesian hipsters, arms crossed in their black turtlenecks and sunglasses, along a hallway lined with mint-green pay phones, past an upholstered leather door, then back and through it (the upholstery studs winking at him), through another one, over a Siberian tundra of grouted tile, crashing around a door woven of vegetable matter—wicker, maybe—and into the clean, white embrace of an American toilet.

\* \* \*

John, behind him, sniffs. "You enjoy the show?"

Roger pulls his head up and opens his puffy eyelids. Bits of raw fish and seaweed greet him, half-digested grains of rice like stucco sprayed onto the rim of the toilet. There are tears in his eyelashes, where they've been coughed out by the heavens. "D't it get you going?" His speech slurred by whiskey into a sneer.

Roger rolls, sitting, into the side of the stall, tries to look John in the eye, but he's facing away, into a mirror. Giving up, he mumbles, "Guess so."

John snorts. "Don't even get it, do you?" He jerks forward a little. "You get the little message those two are—are sending out there?"

"I get it," Roger growls.

"You sure?" He sways, puts his hand on the mirror. The massive leather doors have ground the music down to an intermittent rattle. The only other sound is a gentle hiss vibrating through the pipes and fixtures.

"You know," John continues, "I used to really hope—you and Brit could keep it together. At least, I think I did. I don't know, maybe I didn't. But I sure don't—have any hope like that any more. I've lived in Hong Kong too long."

"Oh, what would you know about it anyway? You never fell in love with a white."

John snaps his head toward Roger, takes three measured strides, and crouches beside him. His intonation has sharpened, lost its garbled quality. "So what was it like then? You tell me. Was it like giving up on being Asian? Huh? Was it like having all your talent ripped away? All your clever little quotes? Huh? Look at you! *Was it? Is that what it was like?*"

Roger looks up at him. Oddly enough, a quote pops into his head. *The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power.* His voice is hoarse, almost a whisper. His desire is nothing more than an article of oppression. "Pretty much."

They stare at each other this way for a dozen heartbeats, then John stands up. "Can you find your way back to your hotel from here?" His British accent has returned.

"Yeah. No problem."

"I've got some last minute stuff I've—"

"Look, don't bother, okay?"

In the ensuing pause, one of the sunglassed hipsters enters, hesitates.

"Okay. Goodbye."



None of the forewarnings made a difference. Still it surprises. The trucks are green, older than anything else on the road. They might have been built during the last World War. Red stars are painted on the doors, and the stars are what everyone outside is staring at. As the trucks drive by, the stars are what everyone is afraid of. Then the column ends, and another one, consisting entirely of taxis, passes by.

Judging the search for a cab clearly futile, Roger guesses at a direction and starts walking. The few people he sees are all running from one place to another. Periodically, there is a flash just beyond the line of nearby buildings, followed by an ominous rumbling sound. The first several times this happens, he looks up, but then ignores it, walks with his head down as if tracking someone.

He thinks he's nearing the hotel now. This alley looks familiar. From far down at its end, an amplified voice echoes faintly. He turns in the other direction, but the sound seems to get louder and louder. Within minutes, a jeep with loudspeakers mounted in its bed overtakes him. In the passenger seat, an officer of the Chinese army speaks into a microphone. His words, two or three sentences repeated over and over, ring up and down the street. He could be warning everyone that a curfew has been instituted and that anyone still outside in fifteen minutes will be shot on sight. He could be ordering all non-residents to come out onto the sidewalk with identification papers. There's just no way to tell.

Roger hurries to the next corner, where the alley opens onto a wide boulevard. He looks down the prospect, trying to orient himself. Through the knife-like slit between far buildings, the aircraft warning lights of the Bowl blink steadily back at him. And there, on top, standing with his feet apart and his hands at his hips, Terry Farrell does his best Howard Roark. He's at least fifteen stories tall, and his mouth emits a guffaw like a sonic boom. "We do not occupy a point in history," he roars, "we occupy them all."

The lobby is cool and empty. Roger peeks over the counter to make sure, but there is no one. On his way to the elevator, he stumbles over a low step, and before he can right himself, the doors skid open and the desk clerk bursts out, nearly toppling him again. He says something breathlessly in Chinese and rushes to the front desk just as a phone is beginning to ring.

Roger gets in and rings for the fifth floor. On a whim he rings for the fourth too, but the button does not illuminate. Roger rings and rings, and he does not give up until the elevator has stopped. At the sound of the chime, he begins his walk down the corridor, pauses at the light well. He puts his head through the window. Is he just imagining that the level of refuse below, like a tide, has risen overnight? The smell has changed to that of day-old coffee



grounds, and a fine ash seems to drift upward toward the glittering orange light. From somewhere above, a volley of small fluttering objects—coins, maybe—rains down. They make no sound as they disappear into the rolling surf of garbage. Sighing, he enters his small room and closes the door behind him.

He unbuckles his belt, lowers himself gingerly onto the bed, the biggest thing in the room, and lies very still. He remembers turning on the TV, but he can't hear it now and he can't move his head to look. He thinks he might be able to catch a reflection of the moving images on the lamp fixture or on the clear plastic ashtray, but he sees nothing.

He lies this way for a long time. Outside, a light clicks off; the room darkens and tiny flickering pictures appear on the doorknob and the ashtray. If he squints, he can almost make them out—a cactus bending sideways, tongs that open and close in syncopated rhythm, gingerbread people on a striped triangular tray. Somehow, he rolls himself over onto his back and looks at the screen. The sound is on low, and he hears it clipping back and forth in a dry British accent. He can't make out the words, though. It's some kind of fashion show, a cortège of fair-skinned Chinese girls trotting up and down the stage, savagely skinny, wearing costumes that bear no obvious relation to the human form.

Roger turns his head toward the TV without lifting it from the spongy bedcover and watches until it looks like the program is almost over. Hurriedly, he kicks his pants down to his knees and touches himself. His penis is almost shapeless, shrouded in a thicket of wiry black hair, and his massaging fails to produce any sign of arousal. The fashion show ends and, after a sequence of commercials, a news program begins. The lead story features a live feed from Statue Square, in front of the Legislative Council, where an apparently well-organized army of rioters is biting and kicking its way through a shaky line of policemen. He watches without moving, inhaling in slow, sour breaths. He closes his eyes.

Then, silently, the semen begins to flow, like blood, without exertion or release. But something else follows: a terrible, unnameable emotion swelling in his midsection that causes him to double over, gasping.

Once, the first time they had sex, she put her ear to his hairless chest and called him beautiful. She kissed the smooth skin of his arms, saying he was *beautiful*. And in return, he sent her a plane ticket. Made excuses to an old man and his luckless old wife and sent her what was hers to begin with.

But she doesn't come.

Soon, the test pattern that has been on the TV for some time breaks down into static, and then nothing. A few minutes later the electricity goes out. In blackness, Roger uncurls himself and sits at the edge of the bed. He looks in the direction of the window, toward the harbor, and in the canescent Eastern sky, he sees the future. ■