

DREAMING IN MALAYSIA

A Web Novel
by
Satya J. Gabriel



CHAPTER SIX: Dialectical Materialism

Jay

Jay had arrived in Nanjing in the late afternoon and checked into the Jinling Hotel. A woman in a blue business suit stood in the window looking out. Jay was sitting at the foot of the bed with a telephone next to him and an address book in his hand. He looked up from the address book at the woman and smiled. "Anything interesting?" He asked. She turned around and met his smile with her own. She shook her head and asked if he had any luck reaching his old friend at Nanjing University. Jay shook his head. Sulan Chen was a former classmate of Jay. She had attended Amherst College and graduated two years after him, in 1991. She had gone on to obtain an MBA at Wharton and was working as an economics consultant in Shanghai. She had come to Nanjing and met Jay at the airport.

Jay checked his Rolex. "It's almost six. You want to get an early dinner?"

"If you're buying."

They had dinner at a small private restaurant, Swede and Kraut, owned and run by a foreign couple that Jay had met on a previous trip to Nanjing. They had Italian pasta and talked about old friends, shared experiences in college, and the future. Sulan was optimistic about eventually owning her own consulting firm. She believed that working for an American firm in Shanghai gave her excellent experience and, more importantly, good contacts to create her own business in the future.

"What about your future, Jay? What are your plans?" Sulan asked, twirling Italian spaghetti on her fork.

"Son demasiadas opciones," he said, knowing full well that she did not speak Spanish. She just stared at

him, the way she had always done when he spoke Spanish. She knew to be patient with Jay. He was playful and stubborn, like most Westerners. "I don't know what I want to do with my life," he said, nearly laughing, knowing it sounded ludicrous. How could he not know? Was he some spoiled American brat, living out an extended childhood? He could almost read Sulan's mind. He smiled. "I'm just not career oriented, not the way you are," he said and shrugged. "I am quite confident that you will be very successful in your own consulting business and I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Why don't you do it with me?" She asked. "We could be partners. You have a lot of experience with the Hong Kong Trade and Development Council and your computer expertise would be very valuable."

He sighed. In some ways it wasn't that big a leap, from spy to consultant. "Then I'd be a capitalist."

She shook her head. "Not unless we exploit workers," she corrected. "If we do the work and decide what happens to the profits, then we're a partnership, a commune of two, not capitalists. You wouldn't have to compromise your beliefs. And we could help build a new China, together. You once told me that you never wanted us to lose touch." He nodded agreement, remembering the conversation while they sat on a verdant hillside, looking down at the Amherst rugby team practicing.

"It's a tempting offer, Sulan." This time she returned his smile.

"Okay, then," she said and took a bite of her pasta.



Samuel

The argument began somewhere over the Pacific Ocean and continued for most of the trip from San Francisco to Hong Kong. They had argued throughout the two movies, despite complaints from neighboring passengers, and right through the last meal served on the jumbo jet. Samuel Maxwell drank tonic water with a twist of lime and his companion, who he had only met on the flight, drank another gin and tonic.

"At the end of the day the big American companies, like General Electric and Grand United, perhaps in partnership with equally establishment European firms, like British Telecom, will dominate the Web," Samuel said, deliberately not mentioning Microsoft, which he was sure was just as establishment as the older, more crusty conglomerates, G.E. and G.U. but he did not want to muddy the waters with too much complexity, at least not in a conversation on an airplane. "Big American commercial banks like Chase and Citibank, along with the merchant banks, like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, will dominate the flow of money --- which is always a way to control people and ideas, and, along with the industrial giants, they will control the path of this new industry. The AOLs and Yahoos and Altavistas will either get swallowed up, controlled indirectly by the banks or industrial giants, or disappear. It always happens like that. The net start-ups will do all the heavy lifting, take all the risks, then when the road ahead is clear, the establishment companies will move in. It's a bit like one of those gangster movies where the Mafia boss tells the little independent gangsters to sign on as junior partners, move out of the way, or end up floating down the river."

"No, no, I don't think so. Companies like Grand United don't understand this revolution," the young woman said. Her name was Darcy Carrington and she was an attorney working for Sunshine Systems, one of the fastest growing companies in Silicon Valley. Darcy was on her way to Hong Kong to ink a deal with New Territories Telecommunications. She had been sitting in a row all to herself when Samuel was bumped up to business class and a seat next to her. She was almost instantly pleased with her traveling companion. Among other things, she found Samuel's British accent very . . . what is the word . . . attractive, and in more than a nice-way-to-pass-the-time way. It didn't matter that most of what he was saying was Greek to her. He had been going on and on about capitalism, alienation, globalization, and the way technology was being shaped to meet the specific needs of exploitation. When he mentioned technology her antennae went up. This was something she knew intimately. She had to. Being an attorney for a high-tech firm meant that you had to stay immersed in the details of the latest technological advances, especially those that directly related to your company's patents. So when he said that despite all the technological change that was taking place, *exponential change*, the capitalist giants, like America's Grand United, would, *in the last instance*, control these technologies for their own narrow purposes, she had to respond. "Technology is changing way to fast for these old foggie companies to keep up," she added. "Grand United, with its army of suits, is too bound to an old dog-eat-dog model of competition. Like you said, everything is changing so fast, exponentially, that the world today is nothing like the world that the suits were prepared for. Their MBAs and experiences are useless. I think you're giving the old white men running those companies way too much credit."

Samuel blinked in surprise at the phrase "old white men," especially coming from someone who looked to him like a bleached blonde copy of Gwyneth Paltrow (he had once commented at an academic cocktail party in Birmingham on how the acting pool in Western cinema was rather narrow and incestuous, and how it wasn't surprising to find near duplicates among the similarly narrow and incestuous pool of upper class Americans). His tie askew (he always wore them when he traveled), he leaned back in his chair and took another sip of tonic water. He listened as she then said that the Internet revolution would completely change the list of firms that dominate commerce, implying that Sunshine Systems would be one of the winners. He was unmoved, considering all of this further evidence of the hubris displayed by most Americans, especially those involved in so-called high technology. "Doesn't matter whether Grand United can keep up," he said. "The establishment companies don't have to keep up. As a matter of fact, they never did. They will seize control of the technologies driving the *Internet revolution*, as you put it. The same group of stodgy old men or their sons and daughters will control the technology and the people who develop the technology. The same process that makes the Net entrepreneurs so keen to offer publicly traded shares will ultimately guarantee they lose control of their companies and the underlying technology. Most of these new companies will die and someone else will own their inventions."

"That's very pessimistic, as well as wrong."

"Look, I don't know all that much about computers, but it is quite apparent that the internet is a very powerful new technology. I can see things changing in the academic community. People are talking e-mail and the Web. Do you think anything as important as that would end up under the control of a bunch of computer geeks? Not likely. The Internet was developed by the military and at the end of the day it will be controlled by the same establishment that gave the military the go-ahead to develop it."

"You have a very warped view of the way the market economy works. No one has the power to just walk in and take over the technology my company or any other company has developed. We have property rights, intellectual property rights. That's the most basic protection we have in a market economy,

protection of the ideas, entrepreneurship, and innovation that comes from companies like Sunshine. You're talking about subversion of these protections by, what, a conspiracy of men in suits? Let me tell you, I've been working for Sunshine Systems for two years and you would be amazed at the amount of raw energy that comes out of the people who work there. It's exciting. You can feel that you're working on the technology of the next century. Our companies growing so fast we can hardly hire enough people to keep up. I can't imagine the people running Sunshine Systems being *conquered* by a bunch of suits." She stopped for a moment, glancing at his tie, then smiling.

He smiled back. "Don't worry, I'm not normally one of those men in suits. This is just a façade."

She smiled back. "Anyway, it seems more likely to happen the other way around from what you have in mind. Sunshine may end up controlling the Grand Uniteds of the world or, more likely, making them irrelevant. I mean, that's how capitalism works. Survival of the fittest." She spoke this last sentence the way one states an axiom. "I think it's the suits who are on the way to extinction."

"Perhaps," he conceded. He nodded, thinking again about Microsoft, "Yes, sometimes a new group of robber barons comes along and pushes their way into the upper echelons of the establishment. Bill Gates and Microsoft is clearly doing that. Maybe your Sunshine Systems will do the same. It's not all that different from the way feudal lords competed in Western Europe. It doesn't change the basic dynamics of capitalism, though. Whether the capitalist lords are from Grand United or G.E. or Sunshine Systems, capitalism is designed to facilitate the exploitation of the talents of the many for the power and enrichment of the privileged few. Pirates will continue at the very top, dominating and exploiting the people with the real creative talent. It is never the inventors or the workers who enter the elite. I mean, that was one of the basic points that Marx was trying to make with *Capital*. The salt of the Earth just end up on the dinner plate of the aristocracy."

"Cute," she said. "But how can you still believe in Marx after what happened to the Soviet Union? Democracy won. Now all over the world people can choose where to live, what to buy and sell, who to work for, and they can get rich on the stock market trading online, none of which is compatible with communism."

"The Soviet Union was hardly a place where Marx's ideas were taken very seriously. And even the leaders in the Soviet Union, members all of the Communist Party, did not claim that their society was communist or, I would wager, even have a clue of what communism means. By the way, Marx understood communism to be a system where the workers democratically controlled their own surplus or gross profits, if you will. That certainly wasn't the case in the U.S.S.R. So don't blame Marx for that mess. I don't think there was any real chance for Marx's ideas to be elaborated, much less form the basis for social experimentation after Stalin came to power in 1926. Stalin was just a run-of-the-mill fascist. He used Marx and Lenin the way Hitler used Jesus Christ."

She smiled. "Well now that seems like a convenient cop-out. Stalin kills millions of people, so you kick him out of the club?"

He shook his head. "No, lots of Marxists have spent their careers bashing the Soviet Union and Stalinism. It's nothing new. People like Charles Bettelheim were very critical of . . ."

She held up her hand. "Who?"

"Forget it," he said, shaking his head. "Let's stick to what we know best, contemporary capitalism. Global

capitalism is dominated by the multinational firms of the United States, the European Community, and Japan. Despite the popular myth that capitalism is grounded in free and fair exchange among economic agents, each of whom comes to the market as an equal of all other economic agents, the reality is that we live in a world where economic power is highly concentrated and those who hold that concentrated economic power wield inordinate influence over government. Governments, particularly the central banks, act as nothing more than planning agencies for these multinationals, putting people out of work when it is deemed in the interest of the system to do so. And what about the internal relationships inside these companies? Aren't these command systems, where orders flow down the hierarchy and obedience is demanded or you're shown the door? There's no real democracy in capitalist nations. It's another façade. People spend their lives working in these companies under command and control systems, not democracies. For all of the talk of freedom and equality, we live most of our lives under authoritarian and unequal conditions."

She shook her head. "At Stanford, my friend Tomas once told me that he had belonged to a Marxist group: some kind of revolutionary brigade or other nonsense. But he became unhappy with them when he discovered that Marxists were so into worshiping various heroes, some worshiping Trotsky, others worshiping Mao, and arguing about dead economists or philosophers that they couldn't really get anything done. Tomas is now on the staff of one of California's most conservative congressmen. Anyway, Sunshine Systems isn't run in an authoritarian way. Everyone has stock options, even the secretaries. But what really matters is that Sunshine Systems is a wonderful place to work. It is proof that the system works. Call it capitalism or anything else you want. It doesn't really matter. It works."

"Well, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"And what would you put in its place, communism, where the individual is subordinated to the state?" She gave Samuel a look as if to say "how can you defend evil?"

"You think capitalism is about celebrating the individual? Capitalism obliterates individuality. It forces conformity. That's how people get jobs, by conforming to the demands of the employers. And sometimes they can't conform, because the employers want a man, when the individual seeking the job is a woman, or the employer wants a dark melanin-challenged individual, when the person seeking the job has dark skin. And lots of individuals are cast aside because of the misfortune of not having received a proper education and training or enculturation by no fault of their own."

"How can you say that? Look at me, I'm a successful woman working for a fast growing capitalist company. The problems you're talking about are problems of the past, not the present. Capitalism today is far more open than the one you have in mind."

"We've solved the problems of sexism, racism, poverty, and unemployment? I must have missed that."

"It takes time to solve problems completely," she responded. "In time we won't even remember that people used to discriminate. We certainly won't understand why they would act so stupid."

"And I suppose you would also argue that the capitalism that currently benefits the privileged West --- in part, by controlling lots of resources and people scattered across this globe --- will be displaced by a more globally egalitarian capitalism. The form of capitalism that exists in places like Zaire or Honduras or Indonesia or even Russia, which I'd argue was capitalist even when it was part of the Soviet Union, will develop into the same kind of capitalism we see in the United States and Britain."

She frowned. "Come on, Samuel, the Soviet Union was not capitalist."

"Capitalism," he responded, "is about people selling their talent for a wage and then toiling for bosses who take control of the profits generated from that toil. Clearly, that's what Russia is all about and that's what Stalin's Soviet Union was all about. The Soviet Union was no workers' paradise, nor did Stalin and his lot have any interest in such a place. Now Russia has embraced Western style capitalism --- the Wild West version --- and, if anything, it seems to be even more painful than the old form of monopolistic, command capitalism."

She gave him a straight look. "How can you say Russia was capitalist *before* the Soviet Union collapsed? Maybe you can argue it wasn't communist, in the sense that the workers controlled the factories and such, but it certainly wasn't capitalist. People have to have certain rights to have capitalism. How can you have capitalism without democracy?"

"Apartheid South Africa was capitalist. Nazi Germany was capitalist. Chile under General Pinochet was capitalist. Capitalism doesn't require democratic elections, nor do democratic elections imply the existence of capitalism. You can have totalitarian work places and you can also have totalitarian governments and still have capitalism. All you need for capitalism is free wage labor markets, where workers have a choice of employers."

"Ah," she said, raising a finger, and smiling, "I got you there. Workers in the Soviet Union didn't have choice."

A stewardess came by offering something on a tray but Darcy spoke for both of them in telling her "thanks but we're fine."

Samuel nodded agreement. "I think you may well be right on that point," he said.

"I know I'm right," she said.

"So maybe the old Soviet Union was feudal."

She let out a loud sigh. "Oh please, I don't want to talk about feudalism now. Next thing you'll be telling me the KGB were knights."

"That's an interesting possibility."

She shook her head. "Let's say I accept your definition of capitalism as simply a system where people work for a wage and have the freedom of choosing their employer. Well, so what? Aren't people happier under that system than under any other system that has existed? What's wrong with capitalism?"

"Marx," he said, "believed that it was immoral to take away the right of human beings to control the fruit of their own labor and creativity." The stewardess moved to the overweight man in a gray suit across the aisle. The man was very happy to see both the stewardess and the tray. "By the way, John Locke believed the same thing and wrote as much."

"Yeah, but didn't John Locke have slaves? He doesn't exactly carry a lot of moral authority."

"Doesn't change the fact that capitalism is just another form of prostitution."

"Capitalism is prostitution? That's the big point Marx was trying to make?" She smiled.

"Part of it, anyway. At least, that's what I think. I'm sure a lot of Marxists would not agree."

She shook her head.

"I know," he said, "Marx is dead and therefore irrelevant."

She nodded. "As dead as 1968, but that's not the point."

"What's the point?"

"I don't think morality is so clear cut, that's all. I mean, morality isn't something that is codified anywhere. It's subject to interpretation."

"You're a lawyer," he said with a little smile and raised eyebrows.

She smiled back and said, "Yes, and despite that I do have my morals." She was sick and tired of all the negative lawyer jokes and remarks. Nevertheless, she suppressed that sentiment in favor of more immediate goals, such as getting Samuel to ask her to dinner or something closely resembling that.

"Good for you, Darcy Carrington."

"Maybe in the nineteenth century Marx had a point to make, but capitalism is different today than it was back then," she said. "I mean, I've read Dickens. That's not the world I work in. Like I said, almost everyone who works for Sunshine Systems has stock options. We share in the success or failure of the company. That's what capitalism is all about today. Maybe the workers work for a wage, but they are also part owners of the company. Maybe we should call it *people's capitalism* or something like that."

"Is that so? Well, let me ask you a question."

"Fire away, Mr. Marx."

"Does Sunshine Systems manufacture its high-tech equipment in the United States?"

She thought for a moment. "Some of it."

"Some of it?"

"We also work with contract manufacturers outside the U.S. We contract with major facilities in China and Malaysia, for example. I think that's where most of our products are manufactured."

"And do *those* workers have stock options?"

"Of course not," she said. "They aren't really Sunshine employees."

"Hmmm," he smiled.

"Besides, I think capitalism is moral because it's the most effective system for creating wealth ever known to the human species. It's not simply a case of distribution, you know. The total pie is a lot bigger because of capitalism."

"Is that what you *really* think? You sound like you're doing a promotion for the American Chamber of Commerce."

She shrugged. "Look, it works for me. It pays the bills." This time she had the raised eyebrows. She took the last sip from her gin and tonic. She looked around for the stewardess.

"You need something?" He asked. She looked like someone who needed something.

She shook her head. "No, not really. I've had three of these already." She put the glass down, deciding that moderation was the better part of valor. "So how come you don't drink?"

"I guess my head is foggy enough without the need for stimulants," he said, which made her laugh. She shifted her body slightly and brushed invisible lint from her dress. "I have been known to drink wine from time to time," he said. "It keeps my doctor happy. He says it is good for my blood pressure."

"I thought being a professor was a cure for high blood pressure," she said. He smiled and shook his head, as if to say 'I wish.' She shrugged. "My friend, Celia, will be disappointed to hear that."

"Why is that?"

"Celia has this plan: she gets rich working for Sunshine, on the options, then retires and works as a professor at some quiet little college in New England."

"Well, I don't think the academic life is inherently stressful. Maybe it will work for her."

"But it doesn't work for you?" He shook his head. "It could be," she said, "that you're just a type A person. You know, the type who can't relax, no matter what you do for a living."

"I suppose," he said. He wanted to say more, but then again, he didn't.

The stewardess moved past them, checking each set of passengers and smiling.

Their eyes met again for another long drink of silence, which Darcy finally broke. "You're not wearing a ring," she said finally.

"Ring?"

"You're not married?"

"No, I am," he replied.

She noticed that he frowned when he said this. "What's her name?"

"Who?"

"Your wife, silly?"

"Oh," he said, and hesitated. "Angie, Angela."

"Which is it? Angie or Angela?"

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter." He thought for a moment, then added. "We're separated." He had not wanted to say this, fearing that it might be taken the wrong way and he made no further effort at elaboration, nor did he intend to if she pressed the point.

She contemplated asking him why he was separated from his wife, where she was, other such questions,

but again went with moderation. "Been there, done that," she said, instead. "Is she British?"

"Of course," he said, wondering what might be the subtext for that question.

The seat belt lights came on as the plane was beginning its approach to Hong Kong and the precarious landing at Kai Tak Airport, a landing that afforded one a view into neighboring apartments that was, for those who had not taken the trip before, always a bit surprising, if not frightening.

"Are *you* married?" He asked.

She showed him her wedding ring. "All this time and you didn't notice."

He shook his head.

"Three years and counting."

"Children?"

"Just one," she said, "my husband. Ricky's emotionally about fourteen."

"Why do you say that?"

She smiled. "I wish you knew Ricky, you wouldn't ask."

"So why'd you marry him?"

Her eyes twinkled in the cabin light. "I'm a sucker for a good looking man, and Ricky is a knock-out."

"Okay," he said. "Fair enough."

"I'm staying at the Royal Garden in Kowloon," she said. "Why don't we have dinner sometime before you leave?"

He didn't respond right away. He knew that he wouldn't be having dinner with her, but he still didn't respond.

She took a card from the briefcase at her feet and handed it to him. And there was another of those long looks to go with the card. She smiled as he thought it over. She found his hesitance increased her desire for an affirmative response.

Staring into her eyes, he held the card without looking at it, then nodded and said, "Okay. We can continue our conversation." He did not know why he said those words. He really had no intention of seeing her again.

She nodded agreement. "Yeah," she said, "that would be nice."



Love's function is to fabricate unknownness. e.e. cummings.



Faith

Faith stood in the crowd on one side of the ramp leading from the area where tourists and other foreigners, as well as returning residents of Hong Kong, exited the restricted area where they had passed customs. It was twilight and the world outside was rapidly darkening. The buzz in the air was normal for Hong Kong, a constant feeling of motion and impatience.

Faith hoped she would recognize Samuel Taylor Maxwell from the photograph Michael had provided her. As it turned out, it was not difficult. He was the only "black man" to come down the ramp that day. He was walking and talking to a blonde haired woman. Faith held up the sign and waved.

A woman walking down the ramp had turned as she passed and stared straight at Faith, looking at her as one looks at a particularly animated mental patient.

Just when Faith thought Samuel would walk right past and not notice her, the blonde woman pointed in her direction. Samuel turned and his face lit up with surprise. He said something to the woman, shook his head, and they seemed to say their goodbyes. The blonde haired woman pulled her rolling suitcase along and followed the throng through the exit doors. Samuel walked over to the divider, but Faith motioned for him to keep going. She hurried to the end of the ramp.

Good grief, who is she? Obviously his brother had not come to meet him. *That's so like Michael.* At the same time Faith's mind was going over what she would say to Samuel. The two faced each other at the end of the ramp, but she would not let him stop. "Hurry, hurry," she said. He had a rolling cart with two large suitcases. He was straining to keep it from veering to one side because it seemed to have a faulty wheel and she tried in vain to take it from him. "No, no," he said, "I can do it." She guided him out the exit door and towards the long line that curled around metal pipes to the taxi stands.

"We can take a taxi to Michael's flat," she said. Only when they were in the line and stationary did she turn and say, "I'm Faith."

"I don't think Michael told me about you," he said, without much thought.

She seemed surprised to hear this. "He talks about you all the time," she said.

"Oh," he said, "that's nice to hear. Do you work with Michael?"

"No." At first it seemed that she would only provide this monosyllabic response to his question, but then, as an afterthought, added, "I'm a lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist."

"Hong Kong Baptist?"

"Yes. I teach economics."

He nodded. "I see."

"I'm still working on my dissertation. Michael tells me I'll never finish."

"Why would he say that?"

"Oh, I hope he's just teasing me. He says I spend too much time reading and not enough time writing. He says no one really cares about dissertations anyway."

"That's not entirely true."

"Don't say that, you'll make me even more nervous."

"Sorry."

"Michael said you studied economics, too. Is that right?"

"Yes, but unlike my brother, I never pursued a doctorate in the subject. After getting a master's in economics, I'd had enough indifference curves, isoquants, and fairy tales about perfect competition."

"That's exactly what Michael told me about you," she said. "He says you don't think much of economists. You teach philosophy now, is that right?"

He nodded. "Not quite as lucrative as economics, I'm afraid, but I enjoy it immensely."

She smiled. "You don't make much money."

He smiled. "That's right. Then again, I don't think any academic can claim to be on the road to riches."

Faith knew that Michael had loaned his brother money. It had been after Samuel had separated from his wife, Angela. It seemed that Angela had cleaned out their joint bank accounts and left Samuel with a large mountain of credit card bills and other debts. Faith thought that Angela must have been a very clever woman. At least it was clear that Angela had planned their separation very carefully. That was the way someone in Hong Kong would have done it, too. Faith had heard the whole story from Michael during the two year period when she and Michael were seeing each other secretly (he was still living with his wife, Trudy, at the time in Washington, D.C. and Faith was living in Paris, where the two of them met). She had been very impressed when Michael had asked her opinion of whether he should lend money to his brother. "I don't know if I should do this," he had said. "Samuel needs to paddle his own canoe." She had told Michael to help his brother. Now in this moment, she thought about that past conversation but did not want to embarrass Samuel by mentioning any of this.

"Michael is really compulsive about money," Faith said. "He should live in Hong Kong. He would be just like everybody else."

"It's funny. Michael was always very much the pseudo-hippie when we were growing up. He decried materialism."

She smiled. "Well, he's not like that now."

Samuel watched as Faith, who noticed a clear path to a waiting taxi, dashed past an elderly couple, nearly knocking down the woman, and started rattling off something in Cantonese to the driver. The driver got out of his car and was frowning. It looked for all the world as if a fist fight might break out. Samuel didn't understand Cantonese, although he was fluent in Mandarin, but he had some idea of what was happening and made his way, pulling the cart behind him, towards the taxi. As he reached them, the driver, who was continually shaking his head, moved behind the taxi and opened the trunk. He motioned

for Samuel to pull the cart to the back of the small red car. Before Samuel could reach his destination the driver moved over and yanked one of the bags off the cart and slung it into the trunk with a loud thud. Samuel picked up the other suitcase but the driver took it from him and crammed it awkwardly into the trunk with the other bag. They were too big or the trunk too small and the lid would not shut, so the driver took out a bungee cord and tied the trunk hood down so it wouldn't fly open and send the bags hurtling down the highway. The driver was clearly reticent to take them where Faith wanted to go and his frown intensified as he yelled something in Cantonese to Faith, then turned to Samuel and said in a firm tone of voice, "You get in." The driver then went around to the right side of the car and got in. Faith opened the rear door and motioned for Samuel to get in and he complied.

"What was that all about?" Samuel asked after they were on their way. The driver was zipping madly through the traffic in a manner that would make any New York cabbie proud and, despite the bungee cord, Samuel looked back half expecting to see his luggage bouncing away behind them.

"He's just in a bad mood," she said. "I think he wanted to take some tourists to one of the big hotels. That way he could overcharge, get a big tip, and make a lot of money."

The driver, looking in his rear view mirror, let out another barrage of Cantonese. Faith returned in kind. Samuel felt like the out-of-place foreigner he was. *I've got to learn Guangzhou Hwa*, he thought.

Faith turned to Samuel, sighed, and said, "In Hong Kong you have to be very assertive if you want to get what you want." She fingered the knot on the yellow silk scarf around her neck.

"I guess I wouldn't get along very well here, then," Samuel said. "I've always had a difficult time with being assertive."

"Michael can be like that sometimes."

"I know," he said. "That's why he's still married to Trudy." He watched for her reaction.

Faith smiled. "My mother loves Michael. She says he is very successful and would make a good husband. She doesn't know about Trudy. Sometimes I wonder if he really plans to get a divorce."

"I can't be of much help to you on that," he said.

"I suppose Trudy will sign the papers when she realizes he's not coming back to her."

Samuel didn't even know there were any "papers," so he did not respond.

The taxi lurched to one side as the driver moved to avoid hitting a truck that had suddenly slowed. The taxi squeezed between two Mercedes in a maneuver that was amazing for not having resulted in an accident.

Samuel searched in vain for a seatbelt. "I could never understand why Michael didn't take a teaching job," Samuel said, changing the subject. "He's nothing more than a bureaucrat in the IMF. What kind of life is that?"

"Michael is going to quit the IMF," Faith said.

He looked at her with surprise. "He's planning to quit his job? When did he decide to do this?"

"He told me almost a month ago," she said.

Samuel leaned back in the seat and, for a moment, released his grip on the door handle. "You mean to tell me that Michael decided over a month ago to leave the IMF?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "He didn't tell you?"

Samuel shook his head. "No. He never said anything remotely like that to me."

"Maybe he just forgot. I thought maybe he would have called you or at least sent you an e-mail."

Again, Samuel shook his head. "He said nothing about leaving his position."

"I think he's making a lot of money doing independent consulting," she said. She did not want to admit that she had been secretly going through his papers and knew that he had been stuffing thousands of U.S. dollars away in various mutual funds, bank accounts, and a couple of brokerage accounts. She had even found something very strange, a piece of paper indicating that Michael had a numbered Swiss bank account. She did not know how much money he had in the account and had been unable to find any more information about it, although she did memorize the account number. If they were going to be married, he would have to be more forthcoming about such things. "He seems very excited about being his own boss."

Samuel rubbed his forehead and frowned. "That's very strange," he said. "I would think he would have told me."

She shrugged. "I'm sure he just forgot."

"It doesn't seem the sort of thing Michael would forget." He glanced out the window. The world was darkening. The sidewalks were teeming with people, constantly in motion. The cars and trucks and buses were not moving all that fast, but there were so many that it amplified the pace of movement. Samuel could see people selling clothing from tables in large open entrances of buildings. People pushing and shoving onto double decker buses. Bicycles and motorcycles zipping between the cars and trucks and buses. All manner of movement. In this landscape, stillness was only momentary, too short for a snapshot image.

"I hope you don't think he deliberately didn't tell you," Faith said, thinking Samuel was angry.

He turned back to her and shook his head. "Oh, nothing like that," he said. "It's just that Michael was accustomed to confiding in me. I think he's become a bit more closed over the past year and I'm not sure why."

She blinked, trying to think of an appropriate response.

"Don't worry about it," he said, realizing that she was taking some sort of responsibility for Michael's oversight. "As you said, he probably just forgot to mention it. I'll be happy for the opportunity to sit and talk with him. It's been several months since I've even seen Michael."

She reached over and touched the back of Samuel's hand. Her touch made his skin tingle. "I know he has been wanting to see you," she said. "He was very sad that he could not meet you at the airport."

He nodded and thanked her.



Ali Jamal

Ali Jamal had found out about the death of Ezam Aziz from Fadil Hamzah. He had then inquired about the matter with Home Minister Kamal Razak, who said that Ezam Aziz had the heart attack *after* being released from custody. Razak had been obviously annoyed that Ali Jamal was asking him about Aziz. Razak was one of those ministers who was not impressed by the possibility of Ali Jamal as future p.m.

"We asked him some questions and let him go home," Razak had lied. Ali Jamal knew it was a lie.

Ali Jamal planned to make Kamal Razak one of the first ministers booted out when he replaced Akil Abdullah, which he was certain was not far off. After all, Abdullah was already past 70 years old and had that tired look about him. It won't be long, Ali Jamal told himself.

Finished with Razak, Ali Jamal made his way to the conference room for a meeting with senior advisors.

D. J. Nathan and Mona were both in attendance, along with Khalil Ahmad and Low Seng Hong. He discussed some minor issues that needed their attention, reminded D. J. that he had to coordinate the visit of some Citibank officials, and went over the agenda for Friday's full staff meeting.

"I want all of you to think about how we are going to sell Prime Minister Abdullah on the idea of cutting government expenditures in the coming fiscal year," Ali Jamal said. "That's number one on the agenda."

"Are we talking about a real or nominal decrease in government spending," Low Seng Hong asked. He was the newest member of Ali Jamal's senior staff, a recent Ph.D. econ grad from the L.S.E.

"We're not playing games here," Ali Jamal said. "We need a real cut to bring this budget in balance."

The meeting ended with D.J. Nathan and Low Seng Hong in a discussion on the budget. Khalil Ahmad got Ali Jamal's attention and walked with him from the meeting, leaving Mona to gather her things alone.

"I need you to do something for me," Ali Jamal told the thin, thirty-ish Khalil Ahmad.

Ali Jamal ushered the younger man into the hallway, creating some distance from the others.

"I want you to find out the conditions under which Sayyed Aziz is being held by Internal Security."

"Yes, sir," Khalil said, sounding like a soldier addressing his commanding officer.

"Be Discrete," Ali Jamal counseled. "I want to find a way to get Aziz released, but I don't want this to become public or boil over into an open conflict between our office and Home Affairs."

Khalil Ahmad agreed that he would be discrete and that he would try to find a way to get Aziz released without provoking a response from Home Affairs. Ahmad would have been careful with Internal Security even without the urging/warning of the finance minister. He was not a foolish man, after all.

"Speak of this only to me," Ali Jamal said, and again the younger man agreed.

Outside the ministry windows, the sky --- swept with dark gray clouds --- hinted of a coming storm.



Mona

After the storm, Mona awoke from a particularly vivid dream about Ali Jamal.

She sat up on her elbows in the semi-darkness, turned and saw Meipo sleeping next to her, but turned away, bare shoulders and a cream colored tee-shirt and the peach colored sheet pulled tightly. "Are you awake?" Mona whispered. After a moment without response, she repeated her question but louder.

"What do you want, Mona?" Meipo asked the question without really waking up.

Mona sighed, but did not answer Meipo's question. Just as well, since Meipo was dreaming again.

The air was light after the storm, as if sin itself was washed away. Mona lay back down and fell asleep.



Mohamed

It was a gala reception in the grand ballroom of the British Embassy in K.L. Some of the guests had been transported from the airport in Rolls Royces provided by the embassy, part of its fleet. A few of the guests had arrived earlier in the day and played golf at the Saujana Country Club, where more than a few global business deals were regularly hammered out. Inside this ballroom were all of the most powerful white-haired Brits from Hong Kong and the rest of Asia, a smattering of the Malaysian elite, honored guests from a wide range of countries, including the United States, and all the trophy wives that money could buy.

"Emerging market investors want liquidity," Simon Rekker said. "If you can provide the proper liquidity, you will find an abundance of outsiders willing to buy your securities."

Two British businessmen standing on opposite sides of Rekker and dressed in nearly identical blue suits nodded agreement as Mohamed bin Haji Bilal pondered what the well-known arbitrageur and hedge fund manager had said. "That's what the reforms are designed to do. As it is, at the moment, the banks are the primary source of funding for investment in Malaysia. Our financial markets are still very underdeveloped and not very significant as a source of investment funds."

Deputy finance minister Fadil Hamzah had casually broken away from another cluster of white hairs and was now gracefully sliding up next to Mohamed, facing Rekker.

"Even in a market like this, you can find enormous opportunities for securitizing assets and expanding the possibilities for foreign direct investment, as well as portfolio investment," Rekker said. "The new reforms that Prime Minister Abdullah introduced and which you and your colleagues so wisely passed are a significant step in the direction of opening the Malaysian economy to new capital inflows. Making it possible for foreigners to buy into the Malaysian financial sector is critical to future success. Greater

liquidity in the financial markets is sure to follow."

Again, the businessmen nodded.

"It is all so overwhelming," Fadil said. "I'm not sure we have the depth of understanding in our banking system to handle the rapid changes being brought about. Some people even believe that this is the first step in a new colonial era. They think foreigners will come to own and control our country. In a small country like ours, we sometimes feel swamped by the sea of foreign capital, barely able to keep our heads above water. God willing, we will not drown, but you must understand these fears."

"We are all like ants on the shore of a vast continent," Simon Rekker said. "The world is complicated for all of us. Not just for you and your countrymen here in Malaysia. After all, we know so very little of the Universe of which we are a tiny part." Rekker enjoyed the art of bullshitting. It was one of life's great pleasures. It paled before making money, of course. But once one had made a few billion, then it becomes easier to enjoy the little moments of entertaining chatter with those who take their lives far too seriously.

Mohamed bin Haji Bilal nodded his agreement, as Rekker took a glass of champagne from the tray offered him by a nattily attired servant. "Yes, that's it exactly," Mohamed said. "That's precisely how I felt after my surgery." Earlier in the conversation, Simon Rekker had impressed Mohamed bin Haji Bilal by asking about his surgery. Haji Bilal realized that Rekker was a man who did his homework. Fadil Hamzah felt somewhat embarrassed that his colleague would share such personal information with these foreigners, especially a *Tok Dalang* like Simon Rekker.

The two British businessmen standing to either side of Rekker stared at Mohamed bin Haji Bilal as Rekker took hold of his elbow and drew him closer. "Tell us, Mohamed, what was it like to stare into the jaws of death?"

"When I first learned that I had a malignant node on my lung, that I might have lung cancer, I thought I was already dead," Mohamed said. "It was very difficult to adjust later, after the successful surgery, to the fact that I would live. For a long time I walked around feeling as if I had died and that everything I was experiencing was some sort of dream."

"Bloody hell," Rekker said, a wide grin spreading across his face, his eyes narrowed by the effort. "Now that's damned poetic." Almost as poetic, Rekker thought, as buying 56,000 put options on a stock and then watching as investors panic sell the stock because someone has just bought 56,000 put options. Rekker smiled.

At that moment the British ambassador to Malaysia was announced. The host of this gathering was fashionably late. The rich, powerful, and just invited turned to applaud his entrance. Afterwards, Fadil asked Mohamed, "Did your wife understand?" He wanted to see how intimate Mohamed would be with these strangers.

"No, Izmeen did not understand," he said. "She was too self-absorbed to understand. I was alone in this death-dream."

Rekker's grin seemed to grow in width. "Precisely what I would have expected," Rekker said. "Women never understand. That's why we have to go it alone, eh?" He patted Mohamed on the shoulder. The ever humorless Al Lauter, pretending not to be listening, watched this from a casual distance and

suppressed his urge to smile.



Gusto Narciso

Gusto Narciso had tried a number of occupations since he was fifteen years old and living on his own in Manila. He had gone from running drugs for a small-time dealer to stealing cars to working as an enforcer for a moneylender. But none of these jobs was as lucrative as his current occupation. He had stumbled upon a job transporting women from the Philippines to Japan for the Yakuza. He could make as much as \$3,000 per woman and sometimes took more than one in a single trip. He was getting rich in the grand old tradition of people trafficking that dated back to the slave trade, only now he was able to make the arrangements over encrypted satellite and cell phones and used commercial airlines, rather than risky ocean-going vessels, although there were times when he had to transport women or girls from the islands in speedboats and then by car in order to get them to the Manila airport. Many times he had to share some of his spoils with relatives or friends of the women or girls. It was amazing what some people would do when they were desperate for money. The easiest way for him to obtain fresh products was from young women who would take money for scamming friends from secondary school into traveling with Gusto to Japan, completely voluntarily, on the belief that a job was waiting for them in Tokyo. Once he got them to Narita airport, he would turn the women over to the Yakuza, collect his cash and then jump on the next flight back to Manila. It was the easiest path to riches one could imagine.



Malcolm

A five year old is sitting on the floor playing with matchbox cars given to him by his mother's friend, a strange Jay man who likes to play games on his mother's computer but never watches television.

Malcolm, the five year old, has bean paste on one side of his mouth and a smear of it on his white shirt, which he had worn to school earlier in the day. His mother had told him to play while she put on rice, which was his favorite food, except for bean paste buns, ice cream, cakes, cookies, and some other stuff.

Malcolm looked up at the television, which was radiating some color saturated cartoon.

Malcolm is hungry again. He looks away from the television in the direction of the kitchen.

"I'm making your favorite," his mother said from the distance. "Fried rice and tofu."

Malcolm smiled and went back to playing with his cars.

A spider crawled near Malcolm and he watched it, then chased it away with his red BMW.

After dinner, Malcolm watched more television and Jay came over.

Malcolm smiled and asked if Jay brought him something, but Jay said no and he stopped smiling.

"Tony Chen met with the Governor," Helen said. "The entire office was talking. Maybe Tony is gonna

leave before the Chinese take over. Maybe not. Some people think so. They say Tony Chen hates the communists."

"But you don't think so?"

Helen shook her head. "Of course not. Tony Chen is a bureaucrat. He don't think the chief executive of the Monetary Authority should have a political opinion."

Malcolm did not understand what his mother and Jay were talking about. He could not understand why they could not play with him. It would be more fun than just talking talking talking.

"Concuendo," Jay said and smiled. "He sounds like a man I could like."

Helen frowned. "You should care more about politics, Jay. We should take some responsibility for making things better."

"But Helen, I'm just another bureaucrat, same as Tony Chen."

Malcolm noticed a fashion magazine on the sofa and grabbed it. He started tearing the edges in near triangular shapes and then playing like the near triangles were people talking talking talking.

At night Malcolm fell asleep trying to hear his mother and Jay stop talking and making funny noises.



Whitehead

John Whitehead sat at the head of the conference table, the Manhattan skyline behind him. Two of the corporate officers of Grand United (a conglomerate controlled largely by Whitehead's various holding companies, which collectively held over ten percent of the outstanding shares, and a large chunk of G.U. debt), Alan Sebastian, head of the legal department, and Rolf Hufbauer, head of the telecom subsidiary, Grand Telecommunications, sat on either side of the table.

"This is a golden opportunity for us to expand into Southeast Asia," Hufbauer said in a thick German accent. "We've got excellent inside contacts in Kuala Lumpur and the price is right."

"Any opposition?" Whitehead asked.

"We are close to getting a green light from the Malaysian authorities and no major competitors," Sebastian said. "They have to do competitive bidding, but we've been assured that won't be a problem."

Hufbauer nodded. "We could use KL Wireless as a vehicle for accelerating our Asia strategy," he said. "I think it would give us a major headstart on our European and North American rivals."

Whitehead frowned. "It would be nice to get there before Bernie Ebbers and his pack of country boys."

"Absolutely," Hufbauer said, his eyes trying to read Whitehead. He had been trying for many months to to push Whitehead into giving telecom a higher priority within Grand United.

Whitehead relaxed, nodding agreement. "Good, then let's proceed."



Crystal

Crystal sat in the dim light of a small lamp trying to write a note that she would never deliver. Although she did not trust Mohamed, suspected he had sexual fantasies about her, she had come to fear Izmeen even more. Izmeen kept a white powder in the kitchen cabinet that she used in the cookies she made for Mohamed. Izmeen suspected the powder was poison and that Izmeen was crazy. Nevertheless, she tore the note into small pieces, then tore those pieces into smaller pieces, and she took the whole lot with her to the toilet and dumped it there. As much as she wanted to be heroic, she knew she couldn't do it.



Mona and Meipo

They held each other for a long time, squeezing and rubbing and trying to exorcise all the fears. It worked. When they finally released each other, there was laughter with the tears.

When she stopped laughing, Meipo smiled and said, "You must stop punishing yourself."

Mona nodded.

"You are not responsible for your mother's death," Meipo added. "And you're not responsible for the way your step-mother abused you."

"I know."

And they embraced again.



Kirk James Fuller

The road led to a house perched on a steep hillside overlooking trees and, further down, a busy highway. Mica Brant drove the BMW a bit too fast up the winding road. She loved the feel of the tires taking the curves as she pressed on the accelerator. She decelerated just in time to make the turn into the

semi-circular driveway and came to a stop within a short distance of the front entrance. Dangling the keys in her hand, she took hold of the knocker on the solidly built mahogany door and gave it a couple of sharp raps, then stepped back. The man who opened the door was smiling. "You returned my automobile in one piece," he said.

"You've seen too many Bond movies," she said and gave him the keys. "Thanks for leaving your bondmobile at the airport for me."

"You're welcome." He smiled. "As for driving a BMW, I must keep up the image of a successful entrepreneur," he said.

"How many entrepreneurs have cars like that?" she asked, moving by him and into the entranceway. The house was about 2,500 square feet but looked larger because of the glass windows that ran the length of the living room. The room was also very bright because of the furniture, which was all in either creme or white, even the paintings were lightly hued. Only a big screen television in one corner of the room seemed out of place. On the television screen could be seen a CNBC ticker and silently talking heads: the sound was muted.

"Only the one's with my kind of reputation," the man pocketed the keys and walked over to a long white sofa and sat down. "Actors need the right props. I'm supposed to be a highly successful and independent businessman."

She pursed her lips. "You should have asked for a porsche then."

He laughed. "Now that would be out of character," he said. "Too flashy. Besides, the Company would never spring for a porsche. I didn't need approval for the Beamer. It was intercepted being smuggled into China."

"I didn't know the Company was now working with car thieves."

"Be careful, Mica," he warned. He looked around the room as if to suggest that they might not be completely alone. "Anyway, I got it through legitimate channels. It had nothing to do with the Company."

"Except the money."

"Not even that," he said. "You may be surprised to know that this little cardboard box of a company they put me in charge of, just to keep up images, is turning a profit. That car belongs to Five Bamboo, Limited. We bought it at auction."

She smiled. "Kirk, you probably should have gone into business for real."

"Mica, I am in business for real."

She shrugged. "So what have you found out?" She sat down on a soft, creme colored ottoman. She felt so relaxed in the chair that she thought she could easily fall asleep in it.

"Rekker doesn't have anyone in China, at least not in any position to help with his plans."

She crossed her legs and this produced just enough discomfort to compensate for the chair's effect. "That's too bad." She already knew that Rekker had operatives working all over Southeast Asia and in

Tokyo and Seoul. His accounts had shown increased activity in the region, particularly in the currency markets. Despite Rekker's past success attacking no less a currency than the British pound, he didn't have any chance to bring chaos to the fixed rate Chinese currency without agents working on the inside.

"He recently employed a top official of the Siam Overseas . . ."

She shook her head. "We already know that," she said. "What's the possibility of you getting someone inside the People's Bank of China, someone who might push floating the renminbi?"

He hesitated. "I could get someone on the inside."

"But you don't think they could effect currency policy?"

He nodded. "There's no way we're going to get someone that high up. And you would have to go pretty high up the food chain to find someone with the clout to push dropping the fixed exchange rate regime."

"It's won't do us much good if Rekker's crisis only hits the countries where we already have influence."

He smiled. "It'll force countries like Korea and Malaysia to allow more foreign ownership."

She made a face like someone who's eaten something sour. "Yeah, Bernie said something like that."

"Besides, if we did hit China with this thing, it could easily backfire."

"You mean weaken the reformers and bring back the Maoists?"

"Exactly. Rekker is trying to bring down the entire region, all of Asia. If we see to it that he succeeds, it could just serve as fuel for an anti-American backlash, provide fuel not only for the Maoists."

"Only if we were blamed and there will be no reason to blame us. You'll help see to that, right Kirk?"

Kirk James Fuller was in his late forties, more than ten years older than Mica Brant. He resented her position ahead of him in the regional hierarchy, although no one could have guessed this, not even Mica. He had been a field operative in the Central Intelligence Agency since his early thirties, when he had finally given up on police work. He had been shot once in one of those cases that police officers hated, a domestic dispute. He was a detective at the time, working vice, and would not have been on a domestic dispute case. As it was, he had shown up at the house to question the woman about her sister, who was running a house of ill repute. He had stumbled into World War III. The woman who shot him had beaten up her husband, despite being no more than two-thirds his weight. The man had taken advantage of the distraction of Kirk's presence to toss a telephone book at his wife. The woman had then fired the shot that hit Kirk in the shoulder. He had taken time off after being released from hospital and during that time he had decided he didn't really want to continue with police work. He had continued on disability while going through the lengthy hiring process with the C.I.A., including having to come back to retake the lie detector test. He was claustrophobic and had reacted to being tied down to a chair and grilled. Unlike Kirk, Mica had taken a position in the agency right out of college. She had a Masters in economics from the University of Oregon and had already been hired before the graduation ceremony in Eugene. She had no problem at all with the lie detector test or anything else to do with her work at the agency. She took the work like a duck takes to water. This was something else for Kirk to resent. "I've got key people in positions to spin the crisis, *Asia Wall Street Journal*, the Hong Kong papers, trusted reporters all over the region. All the same, if we find a way to pull China into the whirlpool, I'm not so

sure any of that would matter. The Chinese leadership will draw their own conclusions, particularly the PLA. If the PLA changes sides, it could mean the end for the modernizing reformers and the resurrection of the Maoists. We would have helped to bring back the boogey men. I have to assume that wouldn't be in our interest." He raised his eyebrows in anticipation of a response.

Mica's face had become expressionless. She had been in the field long enough to know that their line of work involved a lot of guess work, and you never really knew whether your actions would have the desired effect or blow up in your face. It wasn't up to her, thank God, to draw up these grand plans.

Kirk leaned back on the sofa. "Indications are that Rekker is contributing to the downward trend in the baht and the won," he said. "If those currencies collapse the rest of the region will follow and then there will be pressure on China to devalue, perhaps even to float the RMB. We'll have to see how it works out."

Simon Says was further along than Kirk knew and Mica wasn't authorized to tell him any more than he already knew. The collapse in the baht was imminent. "Rekker's got some serious cajones," she said. "No matter what else happens, he'll make himself quite a bundle of money, I'm sure. You know it would be easier to help Rekker if we could get someone inside his operation. Make that a top priority."

Kirk had withheld some of what he knew. He made no mention of Frank Hyde or Michael Maxwell, for example. He looked at Mica, searching her face, her eyes to see if she knew more than he had told her. He was convinced she did not. "And it wouldn't hurt if we could get access to Rekker's computer simulations. I'm sure Langley could use his model. Might even be better than ours."

Mica's eyes narrowed just enough for the man to notice. "Bernie doesn't like being left in the dark," she said, further emphasizing the need for inside intelligence.

He shrugged.

"I'll need the names of everyone working on this little project," she said. "You should try again to get to Jack Degenhardt."

He nodded. "You're asking me to get blood out of a rock," he said.

"He has to have his weak points," she said, "everybody does."

"You're the boss," he said and smiled.



Michael

Samuel looked out the large picture window of the South Horizons apartment at the South China Sea. A tugboat pulled a delicate looking house atop a barge out towards the open sea. The structure was copper colored from this distance, it looked like some sort of temple, rather than a house. Samuel wondered where it was going. A temple floating out to sea. Morning light glistened on the waters and a light fog hovered in the distance over the low shadowy peaks of lesser islands.

"Do you want coffee?"

The voice awakened him from his reverie. For a moment, only a moment, he imagined Angie standing in the middle of what was once their shared kitchen, wearing a long tee-shirt, barefoot on the linoleum floor, asking if he wanted a cup of tea. He turned to see Faith, shorter and thinner than Angie ever was, standing in the room near the entrance to the hallway. She was wearing a long black silk robe and beige slippers. "Michael always likes coffee in the morning," she added.

"I didn't hear him come in last night." Samuel looked past her at the dark hallway. "Is he still asleep?"

She shook her head and padded across the carpeted floor towards the tiny kitchen just off the living room. "No," she said. "He didn't come home last night."

He noticed the worry on her face. "Did he call?"

She did not look back before disappearing from view through the open entrance of the white wall that separated the living room from the kitchen area. "No," she said. "He didn't call."

Samuel followed her into the white-countered kitchen. He watched her pull a Mr. Coffee out of a cabinet, place it on the countertop and plug it into a large transformer that was itself plugged into the wall. "You don't have to do that," he said. "I don't drink coffee."

She turned and looked at him. "You don't drink coffee?"

He found it difficult to read her face in that moment. He shook his head. "Michael started drinking it when he was in the States. I think he became addicted." He smiled. "He picked up a lot of bad habits there. The United States is a very seductive place."

"I studied in the United States," she said.

"Oh." He walked over to the counter and rested his right hand on it. "Where?"

"The University of Saint Louis. It's Jesuit."

He smiled. "I have heard of them," he said. "The Jesuits have a colorful history."

She looked somewhat puzzled.

"You do know the story of the Jesuits and their founder, Inigo de Lopez, otherwise known as Ignacious Loyola?"

She shook her head.

"It's a tale of opportunism, violence, and the propagation of ideas. Don Inigo Lopez, sometimes called Inigo Lopez de Loyola, was the founder of the Jesuits. He was born in a castle in the Basque region of Spain, the youngest son of a feudal lord. When Don Inigo was a youth, Spain was embroiled in a war with the African Empire of the Moors. By the time he was old enough to seek his own adventures in battle, the Spanish forces had defeated the Moors in Europe and moved the battle to Africa. It was, however, during the French siege of Pamplona that Don Inigo had his chance to get himself into the history books. The French had the city surrounded and near defeat, and, according to historians, Don Inigo denounced those who wanted to surrender and led an heroic, if not suicidal, counter attack. It was the sort of battle that the movie makers love so much, of course I'm sure the real thing was considerably

less glorious than what the movies depict, no music to drown out the screams and such. Anyway, Don Inigo's military career was cut short when he was struck in the leg by a musket ball. In the pain of having part of the bone in his leg crushed he is said to have undergone a religious conversion. Again, that's very convenient conjecture. More likely he realized that the injury left him little opportunity to make his mark on history. If he had the ego for it, he would have to find another road to glory. He organized his own little band of soldiers and went to the Pope, offering to serve the Holy See in the battle against heathenism. I guess the Pope had nothing to lose and agreed to this. They were nobles and willing to finance their own adventures, so it didn't cost him anything. At the time, the Catholic Church was struggling against the forces of economic change in Europe, change that was undermining the power of the feudal aristocracy that had supported the Church. Capitalism was growing in the cities and with it new ways of thinking. New and still heretical versions of Christianity, a Christianity separate from the Catholic Church, were springing up in this period of crisis. The Pope was more than willing to give Don Inigo and his soldiers a chance to fight against these forces of change. The first test case was Poland, a land that had proven hostile to the Church's teaching and had repelled the efforts of many different orders sent to convert them. The Jesuits proved their mettle by succeeding where these others had failed. The Jesuits went from village to village and demanded that the people bow down to the Pope in Rome. If they failed to comply, a group of them would be rounded up and murdered in public view. This proved an extraordinarily effective way to convert the masses to Catholicism. And that is the reason Poland is today one of the most devoutly Catholic countries in the world. The Pope rewarded the Jesuits, the Order of Jesus, by making them his force for the conversion and education of heathens all over the world, including in China."

She blinked at him, then shook her head. "That's not the history I learned in school," she said.

"Someone once said that history is a pack of tricks played on us by madmen," he said.

"Many priests have given their lives in support and protection of the poor and the mistreated."

He raised one eyebrow. He had not considered the possibility that she might be Catholic. He was immediately sorry to have gone off on his little lecture. There was no point in creating friction with Faith, particularly so early on. "I take it you're working on your doctorate at the University of Saint Louis?" He asked, changing the subject.

"Yes." The truth was that she was trapped in the hellish limbo of *a.b.d.*: *all-but-dissertation*.

"And your undergraduate work?"

"I did it in France."

"You get around."

She smiled.

He turned and leaned back against the counter, arms crossed, he looked sideways at Faith. "Let's see, Jesuits and France. You're not Catholic by any chance?"

She nodded. "Guilty," she said, then pulled the silver chain from inside the robe and showed him an elaborate and delicate gold cross. "But I promise not to drag you to Victoria Park for an execution, even if you are a heathen."

He smiled, somewhat relieved that she had a sense of humor. "Are your parents Catholic, as well?"

"My father is," she said.

"Funny, I never associate Hong Kong with Catholicism."

"My paternal grandparents are originally from the mainland," she said. "They converted after escaping from China with the help of a *Jesuit* priest." She smiled when she said Jesuit and gave him a look.

"Hong Kong is not a very religious city, unless you think of the worship of money as religion."

"I do," he said, "very much so. It is probably the fastest growing and most powerful of all the religions."

"Then Hong Kong is Rome," she said, unplugging Mr. Coffee.

He smiled---he thought it the sort of thing that Michael or he might have said. "Interesting."

The two of them had breakfast. No coffee. But Faith did make green tea, which they both drank. She talked about Hong Kong Baptist and her work there, after mentioning that she would have to leave for campus in about an hour to meet with students.

"I thought I wanted to teach," Faith said, "but after working at Hong Kong Baptist I think I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

She held the teacup in both hands and took a sip, then set it down on the small, round glass-topped table. "I found out that my students don't love learning as much as I love teaching."

"I know what you mean," he said. "It's not an affliction that's restricted to Hong Kong, I'm afraid. A lot of my students at the University of Birmingham aren't terribly interested in much beyond getting a piece of paper and the requisite credentials for a job."

"Then why go to school?"

"They go to school because it gives them a higher value in the marketplace. Most students have come to think of themselves as commodities that need to be marketed. Adding a degree from the right institution provides patina. In other words, capitalism has captured their hearts and minds."

She smiled. "It does sound like the world is becoming more and more like Hong Kong." She frowned and looked away.

"What is it?"

She turned back to Samuel and tried to smile. "Just wondering where Michael is. He was supposed to come back last night. He would have called . . ."

"Don't worry, Faith, I'm sure he's okay."

She nodded. They talked a bit more before she excused herself. She wanted to shower and get dressed. Samuel went back to the large windows that overlooked the South China Sea. Once she was gone from the room, he put on his own frown, allowing the worry that he hid from Faith to take control of his face. It was strange that Michael would not have come back. Even if he was having problems with Faith,

which Samuel did not know to be the case, certainly he would have come back to see his brother. Despite what he had told Faith, he was not at all sure that Michael was fine.



Quietly, officials with a Hong Kong firm, innocuously named Kerr-Philips, Limited, made a bid with the Malaysian government to take control of the bankrupt KL Wireless Cable. Kerr-Philips managed to bid slightly more than the much larger and more powerful American firm, Grand United, and with terms virtually identical to those of the American firm. It was not public knowledge at the time but Kerr-Philips was owned by a holding company headquartered in Bermuda, Bermuda Wanchai Holdings, which was owned by another Hong Kong company, Li Ocean Trading Company, which was majority owned by a mainland Chinese firm, Crystal Radio & Television, Limited, which was itself majority owned by a state-owned enterprise, Shanghai Red Star Enterprises, which had close ties to the Chinese military.

Rather than agree to the results of the bidding process, the Malaysian Ministry of Finance decided to nullify the results of the bidding and to seek alternative means of resolving the bankruptcy of KL Wireless. However, after a visit to Kuala Lumpur by the CEO of Kerr-Philips, Robert Ma, and his meetings with Akil Abdullah and Ali Jamal, it was decided to allow Kerr-Philips to take control of KL Wireless. As a consolation prize, Kerr-Philips entered into a joint-venture arrangement with Grand United in both Hong Kong and Malaysia and agreed to sell a minority stake in KL Wireless to the American conglomerate for a price that valued the Malaysian firm at considerably more than the original bidding.

Meanwhile, Fadil Hamzeh donated a recent financial windfall to several political and civic organizations, including the ruling party and an Islamic educational foundation.

•→NEXT CHAPTER

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DREAMING IN MALAYSIA

A Web Novel

by

Satya J. Gabriel



CHAPTER SEVEN: Eclipse

A song by Elvis Costello played from a large boom box that rested atop a coffee table next to an open box of half eaten, mixed chocolates, and a plain copper-colored ash tray. White gray smoke curled up towards the ceiling from Meipo's cigarette. She and her younger brother, Lionel, home for Spring break, watched the muted television from the sofa. Lionel, who had just stopped over to visit big sister, ate peanuts from a wooden bowl. Babble uttered soundlessly from the tube and they watched it blankly, watching the lips and hips moving about on the screen and not needing to hear the words from the *situation comedy*. Earlier that day they had said goodbye to their father at the airport. He was on his way to Djakarta to make a deal with a conglomerate connected to Indonesian strongman Suharto. Before departing, he had told Meipo and Lionel that the deal would transform Orbaw International into a first world firm, but would also require a substantial commitment of funds. The deal would almost double the size of the company in asset terms and more than double the company's earnings. Older brother Beng had once told Meipo that the future of father's business was in Indonesia, one of the most populous and resource rich countries on the planet. It seemed increasingly that Beng was correct.

The actors on the television set were two dimensional, improbable and not funny. Even with the sound off, Meipo knew there would be an annoying laugh track, there always was. (The sound of dead people laughing.) A woman pranced about in front of the camera wearing far too little to be taken seriously (and this showing on a television in a country where you can still get arrested for wearing improper bathing attire), speaking (Meipo had seen this show so many times that she could hear the voice in her mind) in a whiny voice that reinforced this impression. The two males, though far more dressed than her, seemed hardly more intelligent or more deserving of anything but derision. The woman was toying with the men. Meipo could see this without hearing what was being said. It was a familiar, all too American form of seduction. She marveled at the lack of subtlety on television, thought about retrieving the remote

control from the coffee table and turning it off. Inertia got the better of her, however, and she did not move, preferring, perhaps, to let the music of Costello transform the nonsense on the screen into a sarcastic music video. Lionel, engrossed in telling her a story, hardly cared one way or the other.

"... and the entire deal was Beng's idea," he continued. "He thinks Papa will put him in charge of the entire Indonesian operation within two years. Personally, I hope Beng's right. It would take a lot of pressure off. As long as Beng is in the same office with Papa, he'll always be a shadow. He deserves a chance to practice at being number one, solves a lot of succession problems." Lionel cracked open another peanut and threw the shell into the wooden bowl on the coffee table.

Meipo blinked at little brother through the smoke. "I'm glad you're not jealous of Beng anymore," she said. "That entire sibling rivalry thing was getting tiresome." The rivalry that Meipo was referring to had taken the form of several heated arguments during the summer after Beng got his M.B.A. from the Wharton School and Lionel was about to enter Amherst.

In a few moments of silence it sometimes seems possible for an entire chapter of thoughts to pass from one person to another. Lionel finally broke the silence. "I'm over that period," he said. "I don't want to have anything to do with business. I'm completely comfortable leaving that up to Papa and Beng. Did I tell you that I'm thinking about making movies?"

Meipo sighed. "Yes, Lionel, about a dozen times already. What kind of movies do you have in mind?"

"Action movies set in Malaysia," he said, "but with a political message."

"Action movies with a political message?"

Lionel smiled. "Sort of like *Billie Jack* or what Steven Seagal tried to do with *Above the Law* and that movie he made about Native Americans. The only way you can reach a mass audience is with lots of action. Otherwise, no one pays attention, except intellectuals. And that would be preaching to the choir."

Meipo leaned one arm against the back of the sofa and stared at Lionel. "I don't know who Billie Jack is, but I find Steven Seagal's movies boring. What exactly is the message you want to *preach*?"

"We're destroying the environment," he said. "I want to raise awareness about that, especially here."

"Here, as in Malaysia?"

"Right," he said nodding emphatically. "Have you seen that haze hanging over KL?"

"I think I would have to be completely comatose to miss it," she said, making a sour face.

"If we don't do something to protect the environment, the entire planet is in trouble."

"Since when did you become an environmentalist? Does Papa know about this?"

"I don't need Papa's permission to help save the planet. I bet our logging operations in Indonesia are part of the reason for that haze. We're making people sick *and* contributing to global warming."

Meipo shook her head. "I wouldn't say that to either Papa or Beng, if I were you."

"What are they gonna do, cut off my allowance? Come on, Meipo, this is very serious."

"And the family business isn't serious?"

"This is about the future of the planet."

Meipo shrugged. "The planet isn't paying your tuition, Papa is."

"Does that mean I'm supposed to go along with everything Papa and Beng do?"

"You're still jealous of Beng."

"No, I'm not. That's not what this is about."

"Okay, what's it about, then?"

"It's about Papa approving of slash and burn techniques for clearing land in Sumatra," he said, his eyes flashing anger. "It's about putting money before people. That's what it's about. As for Beng, I'm hoping that when he is in charge of the Sumatra operations he'll change these practices."

"Don't count on it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but Beng is more oriented to maximizing profits than Papa ever was. He won't change the way Orbaw does business unless it will improve the bottom line."

"And there's no profit in saving the planet."

She shook her head. "I don't suppose so, not if it means putting Orbaw at a disadvantage. Grow up, little brother."

"It's not me that needs to grow up," he said, anger rising in his voice. "You and Beng need to grow up and realize that everything Papa does isn't right."

"I never said everything Papa does is right."

"You never said otherwise."

"Calm down, Lionel. I'm not in charge of the company."

He sighed. "I know that. But if you were, would you continue slashing and burning the forests?"

She thought about it for a moment. She wasn't sure whether she should lie to her little brother or not. She didn't want him to stay angry. "I don't know," she said and shrugged. "And it doesn't really matter, does it? I'm never going to run Orbaw. But one of these days maybe you will." When Lionel didn't respond to that comment, she added. "Or maybe you and Beng can run it together."

He sat back on the sofa and stared at the mute television. A new sitcom had replaced the old one, although it was hard to tell the difference. "I wish I had gone to Hampshire," he said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Amherst is too conservative."

She smiled. "You can always take classes at Hampshire."

"I'm taking one this semester. It's called *Global Peace and the Environment*."

"Ah," she said, thinking that perhaps this Hampshire College course was the origin of his sudden awareness, although such a rash conclusion would have been incorrect (or, at minimum, a gross simplification). What big sister didn't know was that little brother was seeing a Mount Holyoke senior who was majoring in Environmental Studies and that this senior, who he would not likely be bringing home --- she wasn't Chinese --- had been far more responsible for his interest in environmental issues than any single class. "Well," Meipo continued, "maybe you should make one of those movies. It would be nice to be able to say my little brother is a film maker."

He shrugged, still staring at the television. "It doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter, Lionel?"

Again he shrugged. He cracked open another peanut and popped the meat into his mouth. He looked at Meipo and smiled. "Maybe I could put you in the movie, like Spike Lee did with his sister."

She shook her head violently. "Never."

He laughed and reached for another peanut.



Mona was at her father's house. She had gone into the kitchen and was helping Crystal prepare a meal by snapping ribs of bak choy. Mainly she just wanted time away from her step-mother, who was in one of her moods. Mohamed had already vacated the premises, choosing to take the children on a ride through the city, despite the thick haze of smog that was so bad that people with respiratory illnesses had been warned to stay off the streets and many of those brave enough to walk had the good sense to don cotton face masks. At least for the moment, the kitchen was safe, although this wouldn't last. Eventually Izmeen would make her way into the kitchen in pursuit of someone else to complain to, berate, or perhaps even scream at. Of this, Mona had not doubts.

"How is this?" Mona asked Crystal.

"Please, Mona," Crystal said, "I can finish by myself."

When Mona had come in to help, she had left Crystal no room to refuse, but now she knew that Crystal was right. If Izmeen found her helping Crystal, given her current state of mind, it would only make things hard on Crystal. "Okay," Mona said and smiled. No reason to cause unnecessary trouble.

"Thank you," Crystal said and let out a sigh of relief as she watched Mona turn and leave.

Mona went into the living room where she saw Izmeen standing at a window, white curtains moving on either side of her, and in that instance, Mona remembered a poem she had recently composed:



In the Eclipse

by Mona bin Haji Bilal

A wrapped box of mixed
chocolates, circular, undecipherable words
etched on rice paper left dangling
at the edge of the table
where you left my photograph, untorn.
In the heat, the chocolate will melt.
You left an unused notebook,
a lot of words unspoken, but not
unthought. I wish I had you here now
wrapped in a box and unable to run.
Then I could finally say all the words
without reluctance, without fear,
that always lingered just beyond reach
and finally taste
or toss out or give away
 the melted chocolate.



The long black limousine pulled onto M Street. Alan Sebastian sat with his back to the driver, facing Senator George Washington Birch.

"You just signed a contract with Bent Dombaugh?" Senator Birch asked, in an Oklahoma drawl.

"He's going to be a very rich man," Sebastian replied.

"Dombaugh is already rich," Birch said. "He's a rich fat slob S.O.B."

"I thought you and Bent were friends."

"I can't stand the bastard," Birch said, slumping in his seat. "But he serves a purpose. He knows every friggin' prejudice to ever come out of the mouth of the Nascar and beer drinking crowd --- my constituency, by the way --- and he parrots it all back at 'em in his own poetic way." Birch grinned.

"You ever listen to his radio shows?"

Birch nodded. "Hell yes," he replied. "In fact, I tell my speech writers to listen to him religiously. They get a helluva lot of good ideas that way. He's got better damn writers than I do."

Sebastian leaned forward. "Speaking of good ideas . . ."

Birch straightened in his seat. "Uh oh, here it comes."

"Whitehead needs your help."

"Needs *my* help? You gotta be kidding, bucko. Since when does Whitehead need anybody's help."

"Grand United is trying to expand into mainland China."

"You folks already in mainland China, ain't you? Ain't you been in China since Nixon opened it up?"

"Almost that long, but Whitehead is interested in the telecommunications sector, not just manufacturing."

"Damn it, Al, everybody is interested in telecom in China, especially the NSA and the CIA."

"That's why he needs your help."

"I'm listening."

"We need access to NSA intelligence on a mainland company called Shanghai Red Star Enterprises."

"Why can't John just talk to his friends in the CIA?"

"He has. They either don't know or won't say."

Birch smiled. "I see. Okay, I'll see what I can do, but you're gonna owe me."

Sebastian returned the smile. "Just send Whitehead the bill." Birch chuckled and shook his head.



Samuel looked out the window of the taxi, which was stuck in a traffic jam trying to wind its way to Ap Lei Chau, the island where the towers of South Horizon were located. He had tried every location that seemed reasonable, trying in vain to find some lead as to the whereabouts of his brother. He had called the IMF. He had been informed that his brother was on "administrative leave" and that the leave had been approved at the "highest levels" of the IMF. No one knew more than that. He filled out more forms with the Royal Hong Kong Police, but knew they would do nothing. Finally, he had placed "missing persons" advertisements in all the major Hong Kong newspapers, both English and, with Faith's help, in the Cantonese language papers. The answering machine at the apartment was quickly filling up with crank phone messages. Despite outward appearances, it seemed that Hong Kong had lots of people with a sense of humor. The taxi driver started to light up a cigarette, but Samuel started to complain immediately and the driver, frowning, put the cigarette away. It was hot and muggy and he certainly did not want to breathe second hand smoke inside the uncomfortable car. He hoped that Faith was having better luck than he at finding Michael. He took some solace in that thought. It seemed more likely that she would find Michael. After all, he was a stranger to Hong Kong and this was her home.

The taxi eventually reached South Horizons and despite a rather hefty tip, the taxi driver barely acknowledged Samuel and sped away the instant he was out of the car and had closed the door. As he walked down the path through the park-like landscaping of South Horizons, Samuel was planning what he would do when he got back to the apartment. The first thing he wanted to do was call Dragon Air to reschedule his flight to Nanjing. He had no intention of leaving Hong Kong until he had seen Michael. The possibility that he might remain on his schedule for reaching Nanjing was gradually eroding, but he was unwilling to acknowledge any final resolution to that potentiality.

As Samuel was keying in the code to open the front door of the complex, a woman wearing a white silk jacket with padded shoulders walked up to him. She was also wearing a black blouse and carried a Hermes handbag. He recognized her as one of the neighbors on Michael and Faith's floor. He had met her briefly earlier that day, but did not remember her name.

"Hello, Samuel," she said as he typed in the final number and the door latch clicked open.

He returned her greeting and the two of them entered the building. The long faced security guard was engaged in conversation with one of the other building tenants, an older man, thin with a long goatee. The guard and the man both turned to glance at Samuel and the woman. The guard smiled and waved, but the thin man looked puzzled.

"Did you find Michael?" The woman asked.

He wanted to ask her name, but was too embarrassed. He should have remembered. As usual, he had been thinking about something else at just the wrong moment. "I'm afraid not," he said.

"You should go to the police," the woman suggested.

Samuel frowned. "I've already done that," he said. "I'm afraid they were a bit discouraging. Seems that going missing isn't all that serious in Hong Kong. Then again, perhaps he'll come home soon." *He has to come home at some point.* He knew this was not a logical conclusion. Michael's disappearance implied no teleological conclusion of any sort. The world was comprised of chaos.

The woman shook her head as they made their way to the elevators. "What you think, he's got Alzheimer's or something? You must make the police do their job," she said. She opened the purse and looked for something as Samuel pushed the up button. The elevator opened almost immediately. Michael stepped in and held the door for her. She pulled a card from her purse and stepped into the elevator. The strong smell of *Elizabeth Taylor's Passion* trailed her into the confined space.

"This my brother," she said and handed him the card. He was careful to take the card with both hands, which she found amusing. "He can help you."

Martin Fung
Inspector,
Royal Hong Kong Police

Samuel looked at the card, which also had an office address and a telephone number and the same information on the reverse side in Chinese characters, as the doors closed. The woman had pushed the button for the 36th floor. Like a light bulb going off, he remembered: *Helen Fung*. That's what she had told him this morning. Helen Fung. She had mistaken him for an American black. It was a common mistake that followed him wherever he went outside of Britain and there were moments even in Britain, before he opened his mouth, that some ignorant fellow thought him a tourist from the States. Most people recognized from his bearing, his walk, and certainly his speech that he was not an American. He did not want to be confused with an American. There was a time when he was in college that he would have liked to be mistaken for an American black. They seemed heroic, fighting collective evil with a collective resistance, but over time he had come to be unhappy with his *cousins* across the pond. They now seemed a largely defeated people: the poor crowded into violent ghettos killing one another and the bourgeois living either in the white suburbs or in their own gilded ghettos in the suburbs. Their leadership was now mostly upper middle class ministers in expensive suits exhausting their limited potential in trying to get on television. Where were the contemporary American black Marxists? He mourned the death of DuBois' vision. America's black intellectuals were captives of Booker T. Washington's ghost. He had come to the conclusion that the hope of fighting against the twin plagues of capitalism and racism --- one a system that forced most people to rent their bodies and sell their souls in the labor market and the other a system that taught people to hate other human beings because of superficial physical attributes and/or some limited view of genetic heritage --- rested with the diaspora beyond America's shores. "Thank you, Helen," he said, meeting her gaze. They were close enough that he realized she was wearing far too much make-up. He did not like red lipstick, particularly that color red. "But, really, I'm sure Michael will turn up soon enough. The police said as much."

She smiled. "Maybe so. But if you need help, you call Martin and tell him that I sent you. I'm sure he'll be happy to help you."

Samuel nodded. "Thank you, again."

She shook her head. "Don't sweat it."

That evening dark clouds rolled in from the mainland and there were bolts of bright, vivid lightning and the crackle and rumble of thunder. Then rain. Hard, beating rain that darkened the streets of Hong Kong and sent people scurrying for cover. When Faith came in, she was soaking wet. Her short, cropped hair

dripped water droplets on the carpet and she tugged at her aquamarine silk blouse as it clung to her skin. Despite all this, she was in good spirits, or so it seemed. When he saw her, Samuel thought perhaps she had heard from Michael. She kicked off her shoes and walked over to the black leather sofa where Samuel was sitting and cradling the telephone in his lap.

"You heard from Michael?" He asked.

She looked surprised and shook her head. "No. He didn't call here? I thought maybe . . ."

Samuel said no.

She sat down on the sofa and the smile faded. She stared at the dark, empty, reflective screen of the television set that sat on a generic stand that was also home to a VCR. "The weather is terrible out there," she said.

The room seemed dark, despite the overhead lighting. The overcast sky was visible through the streaks of rain on the large windows. Faith realized that she could not share her new found information with Samuel, no matter how much she wanted to. There was simply nothing to be gained by telling and a great deal that might be lost. She felt both exhilarated and sad. She could only reveal the latter. "I'm getting the sofa wet," she said. "I'd better change clothes."

Samuel put the telephone back on the stand next to the sofa. "What do you think we should do?"

She was about to get up from the sofa, then hesitated. "I don't know," she said.

"Should we go back to the police? Maybe there's someone we could talk to. Perhaps the governor?"

She thought for a moment. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "I don't think Michael would want us to do that."

He frowned again. "Why not?"

"The governor wouldn't help," she said. "It would just be very embarrassing." She stood up and again started tugging at her wet blouse. "I better change," she said.

He nodded. He watched her disappear down the corridor. He pondered what she had said and thought it was probably correct. Michael would undoubtedly be unhappy about bringing the governor into the situation if it turned out that this was about him pulling some foolish caper. Michael did not like being "embarrassed" and such a situation would fit Michael's concept of embarrassment. He also considered the possibility that Faith knew something that she was not sharing with him. He sensed this, but had no rational basis for this conclusion. He once again considered the possibility that this disappearing act was precipitated by some fight between her and Michael. On the other hand, it still seemed out of character for Michael to just disappear without saying anything. Michael was not *normally* prone to theatrics. While he was quite aware that Michael had a temper, he also felt certain that this temper would never over-rule Michael's tendency to do what was rational. Or at least what Michael could rationalize. Not contacting his brother was not rational. On the other hand, if Michael was going to act irrationally, then it was quite certain to involve a woman, in some way. Despite Michael's pretense of being a product of the Sixties-era *Feminist Zeitgeist* (another output from his American college experience), he remained ever a product of testosterone culture and was just as capable as most "Western" men of flying off half-cocked over some silly clash with the better half. Samuel shook his head. He wasn't sure what to

do next. He had already arranged to postpone his trip to Nanjing. He was now thinking that he might have to cancel it altogether, although he continued to feel that such an act was a bit premature. He knew that the administrators at Nanjing University would not look too kindly on this delay and would probably be livid about a cancellation. He could not please them either way and clung to the hope that this problem would somehow resolve itself (perhaps by Michael's appearance, post-haste). Perhaps Michael would soon call or just show up at the door. *But what if he doesn't?* How long should he wait before taking action? And what action should he take? He preferred taking no action. He preferred inertia. But he felt a sense of responsibility to act. He pulled the "Martin Fung" card from his shirt pocket and looked at it. He could smell Helen Fung's perfume on the card. It made his nose tingle, the way it did before sneezing. A last resort, he thought, and put the card back in his pocket.



"You need to stop obsessing over Ali Jamal," Meipo said, coming about as close as she ever did to sounding angry. She put a tissue box down on the table after handing a tissue to Mona. Mona wiped her face and around her mouth. The taste of the salty tears made her thirsty. "You did this once before," Meipo added. "That boy from Amherst. What was his name?"

"Farouk," she said. "That was different." She looked at Meipo as if asking for understanding.

"Different? Really?" She shook her head. "So why don't you tell me what happened."

"I saw him with his wife," Mona said, "at the speech this morning."

Meipo waited for something else to explain this moodiness, the tears. Mona just looked at her and did not further elaborate. "You've seen his wife before. Lots of times. Mona?"

Mona reached for another tissue and blew her nose. "I don't know why it bothered me this time," she said. "I think I'm just getting worse. It just made me feel sick." She shrugged. "I don't know why."

Then Meipo had an epiphany. "Mona, did you sleep with him? Tell me you didn't sleep with him."

Mona felt as if she was down in a hole and Meipo was somewhere above her. She heard the question from this distance. For some reason she made a decision not to answer.

Meipo took this silence as an answer and shook her head. "Oh, Mona," she said. "Damn!"

Mona looked up at Meipo and a new stream of tears spilled out onto her cheeks.

In a distant corner of the room, a cockroach ran from one shadow to another.

"Good grief, Mona, if your father finds out," Meipo yanked another tissue from the box and handed it to Mona, who crumbled into sobbing. "Friendship or not, he'll make a lot trouble for Ali Jamal if he finds out. I know your father." Meipo sat down next to Mona and held her. "What are we going to do?" She continued shaking her head. Mona blew her nose again and more tissues were pulled from the box. Mona wanted to be honest, but she wanted Meipo's sympathy even more and just kept crying.



Jay watched the lorry driver unload two large boxes and place them on the sidewalk. The man had blood shot eyes and looked as if he had not eaten for days. Jay gave him a generous tip and the man nodded politely and flashed a grin of yellowed teeth that would scare a dentist. Jay said something in Cantonese, which seemed to momentarily startle the man, but then the smile returned, lasting longer this time, and he told Jay to have a good day before climbing back into the vehicle and driving off. Jay first propped open the door to the apartment building, then placed one box atop the other and carefully picked them up and made his way slowly through the lobby to the elevator. The guard just watched him, making no effort to help. Jay managed to punch the number with a knuckle and took the boxes up the elevator and to his apartment. Inside he unpacked the computer equipment and laid it out on the floor for inspection. It was all there. Everything he had ordered. Thank God for minor miracles. He smiled because laying on the floor in front of him was almost everything he would need to build the most powerful gaming computer in Hong Kong. He would assemble these parts inside a small case that he had fabricated and then carry it to Graham Carville's flat where the two of them would connect to a local area network and play games until one or the other was completely and utterly exhausted, mentally and/or physically.

About six hours earlier, Jay met Graham at the Golden Monkey Pub in Mong Kok. Graham was already feeling no pain when he walked up to Jay and hugged him, resting a very heavy head on Jay's shoulder and then breathing whiskey breath into Jay's face. Jay took Graham's face in his hands and kissed him on the mouth, then led him to the bar and ordered two bourbons on the rocks. "Where have you been?" Graham asked him, almost missing the bar stool. The bar clock said that it was a bit after 2 (a.m.).

"What are you talking about, Graham? You're the one who's late."

"Yeah?"

Jay smiled. "Yeah." On the end of the bar, a woman with long dyed blonde hair and wearing a very sensuous red dress that clung to her shape was watching Jay as she sipped her drink. He noticed.

"Yeah," Graham parroted. He nodded his head. "Sorry."

"No te preocupe," Jay said with a wicked grin. It was raining outside. The woman in the red dress was very dry and had obviously been at the bar for a while. Her gaze was unwavering. Jay wanted to ask her what the attraction was, but he had other objectives and, besides, there was no percentage in hooking up with absolute strangers. "So, Graham, did you decide to take me up on my challenge?"

Graham smiled. "IBM technology against the best that Mr. Sanjay Harris can build?"

"That's right," Jay replied, taking his drink from the bartender and then paying with fresh Hong Kong dollars. The bartender placed Graham's drink in front of him.

"I'm gonna blow you out of the water, you know that," Graham picked up his drink but spilled some.

Jay laughed. "You'll try." He watched as the woman in the red dress put her drink down, slid off the bar stool and walked coolly towards the downstairs washrooms. "To the challenge, then," Jay held up his glass and they clinked, although Graham spilled more on his drink on the counter before getting the rest to his lips.

The best of men are like water, water benefits all things and does not contend. It dwells in the lowly places that others disdain.
Lao Tze

Jay sat in his office in front of the luminescence of his computer screen with the only other light coming from a banker's lamp. A brightly lit cargo ship moved in the harbor below his window, alongside it moved a small vessel that looked for all the world like a bulldozer. It was not unusual for Jay to be working late, but tonight he was pushing the boundaries --- it was nearly midnight. He had earlier used a computer in the HKTDC library to hack into Hegemon Holdings by inserting a program into an e-mail data stream that allowed him to gain administrator access to all of Hegemon's computer systems. He had been searching for a vulnerability in Hegemon for two weeks when he found that the open door was in one of the most obvious locations --- the e-mail system. After gaining access, he had then used the Sunshine decryption program to unlock all the remaining doors and make the entire Hegemon network transparent to him. What he discovered was disturbing. Hegemon's machinery was in high gear, with Rekker betting everything on a wholesale collapse in Asian and East European currencies. But this was not all he found out. He had discovered unmistakable evidence that Rekker was being assisted by firms that Jay knew to be CIA proprietaries, including a prominent venture capital firm in New York City.

Now in his office Jay had considered the evidence he had collected that night and prior evidence about Rekker's operations and those of CIA proprietaries. He concluded that Rekker was unaware of the help he was getting from CIA and that the goals of the two entities was not the same: Rekker just wanted to make a lot of money and grow the size of his global empire, while the CIA seemed to want to break the back of the Asian economies, especially China. And maybe also Japan. Although lots of American transnationals were profiting nicely from the efficient combination of capitalism in the Chinese economy and political totalitarianism in the Chinese polity, there remained those, particularly in the US military and intelligence circles, who believed that the only safe way to handle the Chinese dragon was to chop off its head, which meant to find a way to undermine China's economic prosperity and force the Chinese Communist Party to either give up power or return to the Stalinist model. The theory was that either of these results would eliminate China as a competitor with the United States.

Jay wondered if there was any way to counteract this strategy. If the assault on China's economy succeeded, it could result in severe hardship, even premature death, for millions of people. And for what? So that the United States remained *numero uno* on the planet Earth?

Jay pulled out his cell phone. "Wei," the voice at the other end said.

In Guangzhou hwa, he asked if the message scambler was active. The woman at the other end indicated it was. "I need to talk to first uncle," he said. The woman on the other end of the line indicated she would pass along the message and he disconnected. Jay was certain that the NSA could intercept and decode the message, but this would do no good. Nothing of consequence had been said. And, just as important, the call was too short and this throw away phone too sophisticated for them to triangulate his position.

Jay was preparing to leave his office when he stopped and said, "Damn." He realized in this moment that he would have to come up with a very clever explanation for his hypothesis about the CIA supporting Rekker's frontal assault on the Asian economies. He could not tell Shi Dao that he had gathered a

substantial amount of the raw material for his theory by decrypting files collected from Hegemon and other sources. When he had turned over the Sunshine program, he had left Shi Dao thinking that it was the only copy. It was understood that Jay would not have made a backup of the program and kept it for his own use. This would have been completely unacceptable to Shi Dao, and, no doubt, even less acceptable to Shi Dao's superiors in the Long March. Spies aren't supposed to be making personal copies of the material they pilfer. It was one of the cardinal rules of espionage. But Jay had very little respect for rules anymore. And it did not matter whose rules they were. He knew this was a dangerous, self-destructive attitude. It was a potentially fatal attitude. And he was not stupid, after all. He wanted access to the Sunshine Program, but you can't have access to anything if you're dead. Yes, he would have to come up with a good story for Shi Dao. It would have been nice if he had thought of this before making the cell phone call, but such is life. He would just need to make sure his story was flawlessly logical *and* intuitively appealing. This wasn't the first time he would have to lie to Shi Dao in order to tell him the truth.



For children, politics is an abstraction, except when the political slaps them on the rear or, when they are lucky, brings them food on long tables and music from ceremonial drummers. What will they remember when they grow up? The food and music or the slap on the rear?

The air was hot and humid and tasted of dirt as the noon day sun burned down from a hazy sky. A bus brought another load of workers into the kampung to take part in the day's festivities.

Mohamed bin Haji Bilal arrived in the kampung just in time for the ribbon cutting ceremony at the clinic. The people of this kampung were part of his constituency and this clinic was one of the rewards for being farsighted enough to be represented by a powerful man, the chairman of the ruling party and a good friend of the prime minister. Indeed, Haji Bilal, although he lived in far away KL, had brought many benefits to his constituents, including a new factory in a nearby town. The factory, which was now the biggest local employer, was built by a Malay contract manufacturer with lots of contracts with transnational firms, including one with an American cell phone manufacturer. The local plant was making parts for the Americans. And in exchange for building the plant in Haji Bilal's constituency, the manufacturer had been given preferential treatment by the federal government. The new jobs had changed the lifestyle of many local people, bringing shiny new television sets and VCRs and such. Thus, the people were always enthusiastic to see Haji Bilal. When he made his way to the stage for a brief speech, he was greeted with waving flags and cheers. He stood on the stand beside the kampung chief and spoke of the bright future for the people of this kampung and all the people of Malaysia. He praised the prime minister and spoke of the great vision of the party leaders. And after the ribbon cutting and the speeches, there was a great banquet for all in attendance. Long tables and lots of food. Children laughing. All manner of animated conversation among the clusters of women and separate clusters of men. The manager of the aforementioned plant was the only person, other than the kampung chief, to have a chance to speak with Haji Bilal at length. And then Haji Bilal, feeling very satisfied with himself and the good he was doing for his people, had made his way back to his waiting black mercedes and slipped in the back. His driver then sped away in a thick cloud of dust.



Senator George Washington Birch walked into the restaurant and was greeted by the maitre'd.

"Good afternoon, Senator," the tall, tuxedoed man said. "General Grady is waiting for you, sir."

"Thank you, Walter."

General Grady was in uniform. Most of the people in the restaurant were members of the Washington, D.C. power elite and therefore attired in expensive suits. Nevertheless, a three-star general was hardly out of place. In any event, it was past the usual lunch hours, so a lot of the tables were empty. Birch could see General Grady sitting stiffly at a corner table that had empty tables nearby.

"Good to see you again, general," Birch said, as he took his seat.

"Same here, Senator. I just saw your father a couple of days ago, at the golf course in Fairfax. He's still a lousy putter."

"I'm not much better," Birch said, taking his napkin and putting it in his lap.

"We all appreciate what you did on the defense budget, George. It's always good to know that we have a strong supporter on Capital Hill."

"Didn't do much good, general. Clinton's pretty much in charge of what comes out of appropriations. Slimy bastard."

General Grady almost smiled. "He's my commander-in-chief, George."

Birch nodded. "I understand, general."

"Your father tells me that you may be making a run for the presidency."

Again Birch nodded. "I would sure love to have your help."

"Well, I am about to retire from this uniform, but I never grow tired of serving my country."

"I'm gonna need a national security advisor. Pays a lot better than the Army."

"I don't doubt that."

"That mean I can count on you, general?"

Grady thought about it for a long moment. The fact was that he had been asked by the senior Birch to work for his son. Winston Birch had called in an old favor. He wanted his son to have someone with steel nerves and close knowledge of the players in both military and intelligence. Grady was that man. It was an important choice for a senator from Oklahoma with a reputation as an empty suit to have a national security advisor who was seen as one of the top military strategists in the U.S., the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, a man with a wimp factor of zero. "One question first, if I may, senator?"

"Ask away."

"Why did you go to the NSA to get information for John Whitehead?"

Birch was taken aback. "How did you know that?"

"This is a small town, senator."

"Whitehead got trumped by a Chinese company on a deal in Malaysia. He wanted to know who the red bastards were. I didn't see the harm in that."

"So, who were the red bastards?"

"It was a front company for the Chinese military."

General Grady did smile this time. As the military's top intelligence officer, he already knew the answer to that question. "Relax, senator. John Whitehead and I play golf with your dad on a regular basis. I count him as a friend. Just wanted to make sure you would be straight with me."

Birch nodded.

"On a larger scale, what do you plan to do about the red Chinese, senator?"

This time Birch was more than simply taken aback. He didn't know the answer to the question, hadn't really given it much thought. Of course, he had the pat anti-communist statements that he usually made in the Senate, to the press, or to the folks back home, but none of this had a nickel's worth of relevance to what he would or could do as president, and he knew it. After all, he had grown up in a family that had one of the bluest blood lines in America and one that had tried its hand at politics more than a few times. So the bottom line was that he would let his advisors decide on such policies. He knew that's the way his father had done it. And he assumed that was how Clinton and just about every president since Nixon had done it. Indeed, Nixon was probably the last truly independent president, capable of acting in ways that had not been vetted through official and unofficial advisors. "I don't know," he said. *I'm still being straight with you. I hope you can appreciate that.*

"Good enough." Grady decided Birch had given the right answer. He shouldn't expect to decide on China policy or any foreign or economic policy, for that matter. And it did not make any difference who the next president, Democrat or Republican, was. These policies would be generated within the institutional structures, such as the Tri-Lateral Commission and other similar bodies, where the best and the brightest of the elite and those who serve the elite would be brought together, *by invitation only*, to determine appropriate military and economic policies to further the aims of America's multinationals: *the system*. Only social policies, and not even all social policies, were left to the discretion of Party and individual politics. Nothing else would have made any sense. No system of political and economic authority that was dependent on the obedience of millions of nameless, faceless workers (white or blue collar) could survive if left to the vicissitudes of mass democratic decision-making. No, the system depended on obedience, not just from those at the lower echelons, but from the Whiteheads and Birches, as well. *We are all responsible to the system. We are all soldiers. If you did not understand that, senator, you would never be allowed in a position of authority. You would never become president of the United States.* General Grady extended his hand. "I'd be happy to be part of your team, senator."

A loyal samurai warrior, General Knox Grady had learned to follow orders selectively. His agreement to serve in the quest to put George Washington Birch in the White House was a calculated decision, a step towards simultaneously meeting the mission of the lords he served and his own personal mission. He therefore left his meeting with Senator Birch feeling energized and ready to do battle.



Alfonso Lauter watched his boss from his usual vantage point near the door. A bottle of champagne rested in a silver bucket on ice and matching silver trays of hors d'oeuvres waited on the glistening table top as Simon Rekker glared out the window of the most luxurious suite the Shangri La had to offer. Moving from the window, he turned to Jack Degenhardt and three other men, two Brits and one American. "Gentlemen, today I was informed that the Siam Overseas Bank in Bangkok will not be able to satisfy its commitment to make payments of principal and interest on approximately 600 million U.S. dollars in external debt. In other words, the bloody fools are in default." Rekker smiled. "And, as it is, we happen to be holding some of that paper."

"What a shame," Jack Degenhardt said.

All but one of the other men glanced at him for a moment, perplexed, then back at Rekker.

Rekker walked over to the table and reached for the bottle of champagne. "I have also been informed that tomorrow a well respected newspaper in Bangkok will publish an article outlining the full extent of the bad loans that the Siam Overseas Bank has on its balance sheet or will come as close as is possible to such a full disclosure. This paper will be available in the morning before the Asian markets open for business. I bloody well suspect the impact will be somewhat serious. We all remember the rapidity of the collapse of the Mexican banking system just a little over a year ago and the impact of that crisis." He paused to let some of this sink in, then added, "At the end of the day, I don't expect the idiots on Wall Street or in The City to understand the full implications of this for a couple of days, maybe longer. They are always slow to react to the obvious and then they overreact." He smiled.

Rekker would make sure the traders in New York and London understood the implications of the default. He was already in the process of expanding his already significant short positions against the Thai baht and other Asian currencies, in particular the very liquid yen, in London trading and would do the same a bit later in the U.S. He also had short-term derivatives contracts, many of which were contractual agreements with Asian banks, that would become very valuable in the event the U.S. dollar strengthened against a basket of Asian currencies. "What the traders won't understand until their puny brains have had ample time to digest the obvious," Rekker said, "is that the first card in a house of cards has just fallen. The Siam Overseas Bank in Bangkok owes far more than the 600 million and some of the other top-tier banks in Thailand are holding some of that paper, far too much. All this debt is denominated in U.S. dollars and there just isn't enough in the Thai Central Bank to bail these bloody fools out of this mess. In addition, the money owed to Siam Overseas Bank in dollar-denominated loans is also quite substantial and much of it will never be seen again. I hope you understand what I'm telling you, gentlemen. I would strongly suggest that you get on the phone to your traders, as soon as possible." Two of the three men realized in that instance what Rekker was telling them and quickly excused themselves, passing by the watchful gaze of Alfonso Lauter and leaving the hotel room. They would be rushing to get to their limousines and their cell phones. London was already trading and New York would be open in few minutes. The third man, the American, smiled but did not budge.

"How did you do it, Simon?"

Rekker motioned for Jack Degenhardt to come and take the champagne bottle. He moved immediately to

take the bottle and open it, carefully filling three of six Czech-made champagne glasses. "John, you bloody well know I can't share trade secrets of that kind."

John Whitehead walked over to take a glass of champagne from Jack Degenhardt. He motioned towards the door where the two Brits had exited. "Those fools are about to get on the phone to their home offices and get millions of pounds committed to helping you make a killing."

Rekker smiled. "I am always happy to help my friends, John. You know that."

John Whitehead laughed. "The markets are like those Las Vegas magic shows: a game of psychology and perception, smoke and mirrors, isn't it? I suppose once you've driven the baht down a bit by creating the perception of panic, you'll be in there buying. Yes?"

Rekker pondered this for a moment, a glint in his eyes. "That is certainly one possibility. The road to making money in the markets is to yin when others yang."

Whitehead nodded. "Perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "However, in the world of manufacturing, it doesn't quite work that way."

"What do you mean, John?"

"You find out what works and why, what it is that people are willing to pay for, and you do it until it doesn't work anymore. That's what really makes the world go round, Simon, not your manipulations of the international financial markets. If it were not for those of us who make the turbines and the computer chips and the miles of fiber optic wires, you wouldn't even have a field to play on."

"How the bloody hell could I disagree with that, John?" Rekker grinned. He may have been rich and powerful, but he bloody well knew that John Whitehead was the big dog in the room.

John Whitehead laughed and held up his champagne glass. "Here's to capitalism," he said, and clanked glasses with Rekker and Degenhardt.

"By the way, John, what the bloody hell happened to your deal for KL Wireless in Malaysia?"

"I got screwed by the Chinese," Whitehead replied.

"Kerr-Philips is a two-bit operation. You should have crushed them."

Whitehead put the champagne glass down. "Kerr-Philips is a front for the mainland government. They're hardly two-bit. And it was quite clear that someone in the Malaysian government wanted the deal to go against us." Whitehead had only recently been briefed by one of Senator Birch's aides.

Rekker nodded. "Next time you want to do a deal in Southeast Asia, you should come and see me. I might be able to be of some assistance."

"Really?" Whitehead respected Rekker's intelligence operation. After all, he had never penetrated it.

"You never know. I have my contacts."

"I'll keep that in mind, Simon. I will indeed."

Rekker smiled and slapped the taller Whitehead on the shoulder. "Bloody hell, John, what are friends

for?"

Whitehead feigned a smile. "Yes, Simon, what are friends for?"



The Chinese industrial economy continued to be transformed from a state capitalist model, where most products were created by wage laborers within powerful state-owned enterprises, often holding monopoly power over certain sectors of the economy, to a mixture of state, private, and joint venture capitalist firms where no enterprise held monopoly power or was completely secure from the threat of financial ruin if managers could not adjust to the more competitive market. This was a risky transition because free market capitalism is simultaneously more dynamic *and* more unstable than monopoly capitalism. Shi Dao understood that the instabilities of marketization and globalization could be exacerbated by the kind of manipulation of financial markets that Jay indicated was being engineered by Simon Rekker, and, more ominously, the CIA. Rekker was doing his usual mischief, but the CIA was engaging in economic warfare against the People's Republic. This was precisely the sort of problem that the Long March was uniquely capable of solving: they had the covert resources necessary to turn the tables on the Americans. The irony was that there were reactionary elements within the Chinese Communist Party and, more specifically, within the CSIS who would have supported the CIA's efforts, for their own reasons, had they known about them. These reactionaries remained suspicious of the process of opening the Chinese economy to foreign transnationals and feared that the reform process was undermining the Chinese Communist Party monopoly over political power (the *Revolutionary Mandate of Heaven*). The collapse of the Soviet Union had only reinforced the fears of these reactionary elements.

Shi Dao went to the train station in Guangzhou. He had his first class return ticket in his shirt pocket. After his first meeting with a member of Central Command, it was time to return to Hong Kong.



The light behind the distant mountains was like luminescent smoke, reflected on waves, stretching its thin fiery fingers out in all directions. The temple danced gently on cold, black, silent ocean waves. Samuel, his arms beating like wings, flew towards the floating artifice. In shadows. In fragmented darkness and light. He could see his brother, Michael, pull himself from the dark waters, walk along the barge and then climb onto the temple. Michael turned to Samuel, his face contorted in panic. His mouth opened. Darkness. No tongue. No teeth. No sound. Samuel awoke in bed, breathing heavily, heart pounding, covers askew. Real moonlight poured down from the windows.



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DREAMING IN MALAYSIA

A Web Novel

by

Satya J. Gabriel



CHAPTER EIGHT

Almost Epiphanies

... every time we set up an experiment where we present an electron with a choice of alternative outcomes, we are inevitably multiplying the number of possible existing worlds. . . There are certainly an infinite number of copies, because in most experiments the particles are presented with an infinity of choices . . . According to this theory, we can think of the universe as in some sense starting out with just one branch; then as things begin to happen at the microscopic level it splits and splits into countless numbers of alternative parallel branches, each of them very slightly different. This means that everything that can happen does happen somewhere." Paul Davies, in "Time Asymmetry and Quantum Mechanics"

At some moment in her life, a moment she could not discover no matter how hard she pried the depths of her memory, Mona had developed a rather profound distaste for repetition. She was easily bored. Indeed, boredom was the mother of many a depression in her and so she had come to fight to stave it off the moment it was recognized. She was someone who appeared, at first glance and perhaps even second glance, to be quiet, solid, hard working, and not the type prone to flightiness. This first and/or second glance was, however, an illusion. She was always on the verge of running away from the place she had come to. She knew this about herself, although she did not know the why of it. It was simply a fact. She had been able to remain with Morgan Stanley longer than might have been the case only because the investment bank's managers moved her from space to space, both geographically and vocationally: from New York to London, from bond analysis to equity research, and from researching a limited list of U.S. manufacturing firms to researching a potpourri of Asian companies. Nevertheless, she eventually gave in to her inner voices and resigned, moving back to Kuala Lumpur and into the Finance Ministry. This flight had been preceded by sleepless nights, heightened anxiety, and even thoughts of suicide.

The new internet cafe was called "Pixels and Stuff" and was located near the campus of Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. In addition to rows of computers connected to the Internet, the cafe offered tea, coffee, and various soda pops, as well as pastries and sandwiches.

Mona and Shukri entered the cafe. Shukri waved to the young man who owned the cafe, who was busily trying to hook up a new computer, and the man smiled. "We were classmates," Shukri said proudly.

Mona watched the owner, a Malay, as he untangled a cable and attached it to the locally made computer. She was dressed like a student in white blouse and jeans. Shukri similarly wore a white shirt and black slacks. They both wore name tags, as did most of the participants in the youth conference sponsored by the National Malay Coalition, the ruling party. Shukri had been very happy to find out that both he and Mona would be attending, representing the Finance Ministry. Shukri had insisted that Mona visit Pixels and Stuff. "This is the future, Mona, really," he had said. She found conferences deadly boring stuff, for the most part, and decided that just this once she would give in to Shukri's advances. She touched Shukri's arm. "You're a certifiable nerd, aren't you?"

"Is that a good thing?" He asked, in that cheery voice of his and with an expression indicating eagerness to please. These were traits which Mona found particularly annoying but, given the circumstances, tolerable. It was better than milling about among the other delegates and engaging in banal patter. "I think that if I had my schooling to do over, I'd go into computer programming," he added, straightening the bookbag over his shoulder. "Let me buy you a coca-cola," he said, indicating the direction of the counter, where a young woman, also in a white blouse, was waiting, bored expression and all, for someone to break her reverie.

"Tea," Mona said and he smiled, happy to comply. He ordered tea for Mona and himself and they sat at a table that afforded Mona a view out the window.

"I suspect that one of these days you will be in the parliament," Shukri said, after an awkward pause in which neither of them seemed to have anything to say. "Everyone knows how important you are to Ali Jamal."

"You think so?" She said, then quickly added, "I don't think I'll ever be in parliament. Besides, I'm happy working behind the curtain. You really think I'm important to Ali Jamal?"

"Of course you are," he said. "And when he's prime minister, I'm sure you'll be even more important."

"I doubt that."

"You're just being modest."

"I'm sure Ali Jamal will be prime minister some day, but he doesn't really need me," she insisted.

"Oh, no," Shukri shook his head violently. "I completely disagree. You underestimate the importance of your speeches. Even D.J., Doctor Nathan, admits you write better than he does."

"Really?"

"Yes, absolutely."

Mona smiled. "I do my best," she said with an air of pride.

He nodded. "You wrote the speech that Ali Jamal gave when Louis Farrakhan visited," he said, without any need for her to acknowledge this fact. "It was absolutely brilliant. A lot of people wondered why Ali Jamal would be wasting his time with a man who many believe is the head of some sort of cult, not really Muslims. But your speech really put things into perspective. It was brilliant, really."

She frowned, not wanting to acknowledge his compliment. "I don't know," she said.

"Most Malaysians look at the United States as an evil empire, not just Muslims. You had a very subtle way of putting the visit of Farrakhan in a context of fighting against the empire, without ever actually saying it in so many words. It made sense, the so-called Nation of Islam may be a joke to many Sunnis, but it is an important beach head onto American soil, a possible doorway for Malaysia to use to get into the American marketplace, to recruit Americans who could help in our cause, economic and political, to both protect Malaysia from being undermined or even attacked by the American war machine and, at the same time, create economic bonds that could help us gain more business from the Americans."

She shook her head. "You're giving me too much credit," she said. "Ali Jamal wanted to explain why the Nation of Islam, Farrakhan's sect, was a potential friend to Malaysia. I just put it into words. I didn't have anything to do with the ideas. I'm just a glorified secretary." She didn't really believe that.

He looked surprised. "A glorified secretary, come on, Mona, that's just so much b.s. and you know it."

Again, she shook her head and waved her hand. "Just stop it, Shukri, you're embarrassing me."

"Sorry," he said, then continued, "You know what I think, I think that when Ali Jamal becomes prime minister, he may even appoint you to a cabinet position."

"No way," she said emphatically. And this time she was serious.

"I don't think there's anything you couldn't do, Mona."

"I'm just a speechwriter," she said.

He shook his head. "That's really being too humble." And then Shukri looked more serious and said, "I've heard that Fadil Hamzeh may not be completely supportive of Ali Jamal becoming prime minister."

She frowned. "Who says that?"

"It's just something I overheard."

She shrugged. "Well, I'm sure when the time comes Dr. Hamzeh will do what is right."

"Did he support Ali Jamal's initiative with the Nation of Islam?"

Again Mona shrugged. "It's not important," she replied. "Everyone knows that Dr. Hamzeh is very conservative."

"No one can stop progress," he said. "No one man can top the sun from rising."

"Ali Jamal is the future," she said. "Dr. Hamzeh is the past. Religion can be a tool for progress or a road block. Ali Jamal understands this. I don't think Dr. Hamzeh understands."

"Well, like a lot of people, I'm not all that religious, so I certainly hope that we can avoid turning the secular into the sacred. We're supposed to be building a modern Malaysia for all Malaysians."

Mona nodded in agreement. "Don't worry, Ali Jamal is a devout Muslim, but he is strongly in favor of keeping the secular separate from the sacred, as you put it. He's focused on economic development, not spreading the faith. And I really don't think Dr. Hamzeh is as devout as he pretends to be."

"Well, I, for one, am glad to hear that. I'm really not into praying five times a day and my parents are still devoted to Hinduism. They get nervous when they see pro-Islamist politicians throwing their weight around."

"The Malay National Coalition is always going to be a fundamentally secular party."

"Yes," he said, "I hope so. And, besides, my great aunt says that we are entering a period of dark waters. We're going to need each other, if you are going to come out of this period intact."

"Shukri, that sounds very superstitious."

"Yes, I suppose so, but Auntie Lakshmi garners a lot of respect in my family."

Mona smiled. "The family prophet?"

He nodded. "She once warned my great uncle to stay away from his workshop for a few days. He ignored her and had an accident that cost him a thumb. Cut it clean off with a circular saw."

"Really?"

He nodded. "You know, lately, she's been very depressed. She says this period of dark waters is going to last a while, says she doesn't think she'll live to see the end of it."

"That's morbid," Mona said, frowning.

He agreed. "Of course Great Auntie doesn't see it that way."

"How does she see it?"

"For her, even visions of death come out of contact with the Devine." He drank more of his tea. He really wanted coca-cola, but his mother had once told him that if he wanted someone to like him then he should try copying that person's behavior, likes and dislikes. He wasn't very practiced at it, but thought he should make a go of it with Mona. After a long silence, Shukri looked Mona in the eyes and asked, "How come you aren't married?"

The question took Mona by surprise and she showed it. She almost said, none of your business, but then relaxed and said, "I don't want to get married, that's why. What's the point?"

"I understand," Shukri said, nodding. "Most people get married for the wrong reason, mostly because they feel obligated to do it, to satisfy expectations. Right? I mean, what sort of reason is that?"

Mona blinked. "Not much of a reason," she agreed.

He smiled. "Exactly. That's just what I told my mother the last time she asked me when I was going to get

married." He waited a moment for her to respond, then added, "She said I was being disrespectful."

"That's not being disrespectful. You were just being honest with her."

"Well, it's pretty easy to be disrespectful around my relatives. They have such high expectations. It's hard to avoid the occasional wrong word." He noticed her looking into her cup. "Why don't I get us some more tea," he said, and before she could respond, grabbed the two cups and headed off.



Samuel thought about his meeting with Martin Fung as he washed the cabbage in the kitchen sink. Martin Fung had told him that there was very little the police could do, given that Michael was not a Hong Kong resident and could be anywhere. "How do we know he didn't just leave Hong Kong," Martin Fung had said. Samuel knew this was absurd, but Martin Fung was clearly of a different opinion. After washing the cabbage, Samuel shook away the excess water and placed it on a small wooden cutting board, near three small bowls filled with previously cut garlic, onions, and chilies. He picked up a large and very sharp butcher knife and started to rapidly cut up the cabbage. The more he thought about his conversation with Martin Fung the faster his motion. He looked reckless as the knife rose and fell and rose and fell not far from his hand. The cabbage turned into shreds. He stopped just short of his hand, placed the remaining piece of cabbage on the cutting board and sliced it up as well. He manipulated the shreds and cut them into even finer shreds. "My brother would not have left Hong Kong without telling me," he had told Martin Fung. "How do I know that?" Martin Fung had asked. Samuel had earlier pulled out an electric blender from under the counter. It was another of Michael's American-made toys and needed to be connected to the adapter on the counter. He felt the buzz of electricity as he made the connection. "Your sister thought you might be able to help me," he had said, knowing that desperation was creeping into his voice. Martin Fung had shrugged. "Helen doesn't understand police work." Samuel picked up the bowl of garlic and poured the substance into the blender. He did the same with the onions and chilies. "What am I supposed to do? My brother is missing and I don't know where to begin." Samuel had not wanted to plead for help. "I am in the same position as you," Martin Fung had said. Samuel turned on the blender and the loud rattle and whine of the machine barely drowned out the voices in his head. The machine ground the ingredients to a puree. He had sighed and thanked Martin Fung. The "thank you for your help" was automatic and meaningless, not sarcastic. He had hoped right up to the point of walking out the door of Martin Fung's office that the man would call him back, apologize, and pledge to do something to find Michael. Samuel went to the stove and turned on the gas flame, then placed a large and well-used wok on the burner. He poured peanut oil into the wok and swirled it around. He had exited Martin Fung's office without being called back. The last words he had heard from Martin Fung were "Good luck."



The next time Samuel encountered Helen was during a Saturday morning stroll on the promenade that faced out to the South China Sea on one side and the terraced landscaping of South Horizons on the other side. Helen was taking Malcolm to a particular play area that he liked. There were many such

playgrounds in South Horizons. Samuel agreed to walk with them to the playground. While Malcolm spun himself dizzy on a merry-go-round, they talked.

"Hong Kong has lot of problems," Helen told him. "It's too crowded. Sometimes people can be rude. But it's home. I don't think I could live anywhere else."

"I think," Samuel said, "that home has that effect on people. It's not unusual, really."

They were sitting on a bench. An elderly couple walked by and stared at them. The old woman said something to the old man and frowned as she did so. Helen caught the nasty looks and stared back for a moment. "I thought I wanted to leave," she said, turning back to Samuel, "lots of times. I used to watch the big ships and think --- Where are they going? What would it be like to go with them? It was just a little girl's dreaming. I know there is no place like this. Besides I don't think the sailors would have been very nice to a little girl stowed aboard their ship."

"Probably not," Samuel agreed.

"What was it like for you growing up in Britain?"

He thought for a moment, then said, "Alienating." He smiled, but it was the sort of smile that is used to mask something painful. "I got called a lot of names. I got into fights. So did Michael, although he didn't fare too well. A couple of times kids jumped him when I wasn't around, but they were beating him up as a proxy for getting to me. They called him names." He shook his head. "I think Michael resented being targeted because his brother was *Black*. He knew that if it weren't for me he would have it easier. That's not to say that these fights and the beatings caused problems between us. In fact, we drew closer than ever." He stopped for a moment, watching Malcolm. He thought that Malcolm might soon go spinning off the merry-go-round and then, given the way his face seemed to be rapidly draining of blood, vomit on the grass. "Do you think he's okay?"

"He's fine," Helen replied. "Tell me more, please."

"People always asked me my nationality when I was a kid, thinking I must be something exotic, although I can't imagine what they had in mind. I'd always reply that I was British, but this wouldn't do. It sometimes even led to more fights. I used to think I might have avoided some of the problems if I could have just given better answers to the questions put to me, but now I know better. It didn't much matter what I said."

"Children can be cruel," she said, and she knew this was true. It was certainly true in Hong Kong.

"Kids don't have social restraints, conventions, to hold them within the narrow confines of civility."

"And adults do?"

His smile widened. He looked at her as if she had just won the lottery or something.

"How are your parents?" She misinterpreted his smile as something more intimate than it was.

This question took him by surprise and he stopped smiling. "My mother is, of course, quite worried by Michael's disappearance, if it makes sense to call it that. I still do not know that he is *disappeared*, rather than simply taking care of some business that could not wait." He sighed. "I spoke with my mother on the telephone last night. She wanted to come to Hong Kong, but I told her it would be useless to do so."

She protested quite a bit, but I think she understands that there is not much she could do here that I could not do."

"Your father?"

"He's dead, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry."

He nodded. "He was an architect. He designed beautiful buildings, not skyscrapers, mind you, but low-rise buildings with character. He was a brilliant and compassionate man. He loved all of us very much."

His eyes seemed watery and she was taken by this. She touched his arm, then turned back to look at Malcolm again. "I hope Malcolm will grow up to be someone like that, like your father."

"Thank you," he said. "My father made it much easier for us growing up, especially under the circumstances. We could always talk to him. *I* could always talk to him, about anything."

"That doesn't sound like my father," she said. "My father is *old school*." She was pleased with herself for using this phrase. She had only recently learned it. "And my mother is someone you can talk to, as long as you don't say anything too far out."

"What constitutes *far out*?"

She smiled. "Oh, anything that is not traditional Chinese. Of course, my mother does lots of things that are not traditional Chinese. But still she always wanted her children to be good Chinese."

"Are you *good Chinese*, Helen?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

He laughed. "I didn't think so."



Parliament House was in the West Hills of Kuala Lumpur. Mohamed bin Haji Bilal's office looked out from the 15th Floor of the Office Tower over the green of Lake Gardens. As usual, he was oblivious to the views. Instead, he sat back in his chair, listening intently to Musa bin Aziz, chief executive of Klang Holdings, one of Malaysia's largest conglomerates. Aziz was explaining the need for legislation making it easier for Malaysian firms to import guest workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. Haji Bilal carried a lot of clout among the more conservative legislators and his support was seen as crucial.

"What does the prime minister think about this?" Mohamed asked.

"I haven't spoken to him yet," Aziz replied. "Given your friendship, I was hoping you would talk to him."

Mohamed was flattered that he had been approached before Prime Minister Abdullah. "I know Ali Jamal supports this. Maybe you should have him talk to the prime minister."

"You and I both know that this legislation will not go anywhere unless it is supported by all the key

factions of the Party. You're absolutely right that Ali Jamal supports this, but he only carries weight with the young reformers in the Party. We really need your support on this, Mohamed."

As party chairman, Mohamed was responsible for distributing party funds to candidates, among other chores that Akil Abdullah distanced himself from, even while ultimately wielding the power over this largesse. Thus, Aziz recognized that Mohamed was critical to getting immigration rules relaxed --- he could discipline younger party members who needed the money and he could gain the support of his fellow conservatives. "Klang Holdings would be very appreciative of any help you can give on this."

"You must understand that I am happy with my role as party chairman," Mohamed said. "There's nothing more I want. So my support or opposition to this will be based completely on principle."

Aziz nodded. "I understand. I did not mean to imply that your decision would be based on anything else."

"Klang already has a substantial number of foreign workers, doesn't it?"

"Yes, especially in the rubber plantations and construction. But the labor shortage . . ."

Mohamed interrupted, "I've heard there are as many as a million illegal migrant workers in this country."

"This is exactly why we need to change the legislation. Industry is desperate for workers."

"Why not step up your efforts to hire locally?" Mohamed leaned back. His brow furrowed and he fixed Aziz with a narrow gaze. Before Aziz could answer he said, "I know, I know, not enough workers."

Aziz nodded. "We can't make profits without workers and without profits there is no economic growth."

Mohamed pondered this a moment. "So this is for the good of the country."

Aziz nodded. "Absolutely, yes."

"I Cannot promise you anything, but I will give your request some thought."

Aziz thanked Mohamed and left. Mohamed thought about the many times when Aziz or others like him had come into his office and made similar requests. Politics was basically about servicing businessmen.

"The Americans are so arrogant," Fadil Hamzah said to Mohamed later that same day, as they talked briefly in the hallway about comments the American ambassador had supposedly made to a reporter.

"Don't fault the Americans," Mohamed had said in response. "The problems of the world are not the invention of the Americans."

"Perhaps not all of them," Fadil conceded. "But he had no right to say we are not a full democracy. Compared to what, I ask you? Compared to the United States, a country ruled by an immoral elite?"

Another member of the house of representatives walked past, exchanging greetings as he did.

"Maybe the reporter misunderstood. The ambassador is too intelligent to say something so stupid."

Fadil was not willing to be so cheritable. "No," he said. "The Americans impose one set of rules on the world, another on themselves. They can do whatever they want to whoever they want."

"Well," Mohamed said, "I don't know that I can disagree with you about that."

"And look at Israel, a country that is nothing more than a client state of the Americans . . ."

Mohamed sighed. "I don't want to talk about Israel, Fadil," he interrupted. "Please, not today."

"The Israelis are allowed to engage in ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians . . ."

"And the Americans finance it," Mohamed cut in, "I know, I know. Everyone knows this."

"We are not good Muslims if we are not brave enough to stand up and fight against such atrocities."

"What are we supposed to do, Fadil? And what has this to do with the ambassador's statement?"

Mohamed's secretary popped her head out of her office and reminded him of his lunch appointment.

Fadil moved closer to Mohamed and said in a near whisper. "It has everything to do with it. It is all part of an American-Israeli offensive against the Muslim world, *especially* against Malaysia."

Mohamed shook his head. "America is ruled by businessmen, not by anti-Muslim fanatics *or* Zionists."

Fadil took Mohamed's arm. His grip was strong and Mohamed frowned. "A time will come when we will have to choose between standing up like men or cowering on the ground like slaves." He let go of Mohamed's arm and apologized. "I should not be lecturing you, Mohamed. Please forgive my rudeness."

Mohamed shook his head again. "Fadil, I can understand your frustration. I don't think any Muslim can watch the atrocities against Palestinian women and children and not be angered by it."

"It would not be possible without American guns and money. And tell me, when did the Americans vote to send these guns and money to the Israelis? And this moron calls our country undemocratic."

Mohamed shrugged. "What can we do, Fadil?"

"We can support other Muslims," he replied. "We can support the Palestinians. And we can stop opening our country to be raped by American multinationals."

Mohamed smiled. "Ah, this is about reformasi, isn't it?"

"That's part of it," Fadil replied. "If we open our country up for the American multinationals, then we will be recolonized and it will be far worse than when the British were rulers here."

Mohamed told Fadil that Prime Minister Abdullah would never allow the recolonization of Malaysia, not by the Americans, or their multinationals and then he reminded Fadil that he recalled many occasions when it was Fadil Hamzah who had supported American multinationals wanting tax breaks or other enticements. Fadil had smiled, acknowledged his hypocrisy, and apologized again. Mohamed dismissed the need for any apology, saying he appreciated Fadil's enthusiasm, which was not completely incorrect. Mohamed did appreciate the depth of Fadil's feelings, although he also thought this fervor often blinded Fadil to realpolitik. The American business-government establishment did what it needed to do, no less.

After the private lunch meeting with Akil Abdullah, Mohamed spoke with his chief of staff, Samy Sheik.

"He wanted to know the strength of my support for Ali Jamal as his successor," Mohamed said.

"Why would he ask this?" Samy asked, pushing his black-rimmed glasses up on his nose.

"Perhaps he is thinking of retiring," Mohamed said. "He is getting old and he has been in office for a good many years. It is natural to begin thinking of a transition."

Samy nodded. *Indeed, but who is akil Abdullah thinking of as his likely successor?*



"Danger, danger," the robot wailed, flailing its arms in a circle.

As if responding to its plea, Mona, who was sitting on the floor, back against the sofa, between Meipo's legs, picked up the remote control from the floor and turned off the television. Meipo, sitting on the sofa and massaging Mona's shoulders, smiled. "Turn it back on, I want to know what happens to Will Robinson," she said.

"If you really want to know," Mona said, "you can write to Rupert Murdoch and ask him."



One evening, while Faith was at her aikido practice, Samuel accepted an impromptu invitation from Helen Fung to attend a party in her apartment down the hall. He had spent the past two weeks trying to convince the Hong Kong police to look for his brother. As far as he could tell, this effort was bearing no fruit. He accepted the invitation from Helen Fung, in part, because he hoped she might actually convince her brother to do something, as she had earlier indicated he would. The party was a very *laid back* affair: lots of alcohol, banal chitter chatter, people mostly sitting around on throw cushions, a long sofa, and some other comfortable chairs. Billie Holiday sang "*When you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you,*" in a voice like electric silk, evocative of deep wells of hurt and confusion, at odds with the pollyanna lyrics. ". . . *because when you're smiling the whole world smiles with you.*"

"This is Samuel," Helen had introduced him with some enthusiasm, as if the act of saying his name revealed something fundamental, something revelatory.

Samuel felt uncomfortable in this group of devotees of various versions of American black culture. He was particularly uncomfortable being repeatedly confused with being an American black. Expectations. *Let's all put race in your face.* He remembered that line from his college days and for some odd reason it made him feel better. In the post-colonial, post-slavery era, the issue of identity, of definition, was intricately intertwined with various and flexible historically ad hoc racial categories. Samuel was aware that nothing he did or said would change this process. *We are all born naked* was not a true saying. Some people are born naked, others are born wrapped in hypersignificant skin. Helen offered him all manner of liquor and he settled on wine, which would also prove somewhat effective in alleviating some of the stress. He held the wine glass and listened to a red lipped woman go on and on about hip hop.

At the first opportunity he moved away to join another little huddle of people, two men and a woman who looked like she had stepped off the cover of a Hong Kong fashion magazine.

Samuel sipped on the glass of wine and let his mind drift as the two men tried to impress the slender female. She seemed accustomed to such fawning attention. There was one point when he was asked his opinion of Mike Tyson, the implication being that Tyson had somehow gotten railroaded by the American criminal justice system --- something that, even with his limited knowledge of this thuggish

boxer's life, he found extremely doubtful --- but rather than give a straight response he started to talk about the absurdity of a universe in which a person's only purpose in life seemed to be inflicting harm on others and then being paid handsomely for doing so. The silence this response invoked was one of the few pleasurable moments he experienced at this event. The slender woman even smiled for the first time since he had joined this little club. The smile faded quickly, however, when Samuel walked away after seeing Helen standing near the entrance to the kitchen. She was telling a sleepy-eyed Malcolm to go back to bed. The child looked downtrodden as he padded back down the hallway in his white Mickey Mouse pajamas.

"I wonder," he said, "if you might ask your brother if he has heard anything about my brother's whereabouts. I'd still like to see if he might be able to help. I'm afraid I'm getting sort of desperate."

She had smiled and taken hold of Samuel's arm. She leaned up close and told Samuel that her brother was looking for Michael and not to worry. "He's good," she said. "Just give him time."

He frowned and said, "But he gave me the impression that he couldn't look into Michael's disappearance. He said there was nothing he could do."

She shook her head and squeezed up against Samuel. There was that perfume smell again. "Martin is funny," she said, pressing against his arm. He was not sure what to do with his right hand, which was now touching an intimate part of Helen's body. "You know, 'cause he's a cop he tries to act all tough and stuff. He's seen too many movies. Don't worry. He'll find your brother if he's still in Hong Kong. I promise."

Samuel sighed, nodded, and thanked her. What else could he do?

Billie Holiday was now singing, "*Living for you, it's easy to live with you in love, and I'm so in love there's nothing else but you.*"



Faith had stumbled onto the idea of getting her friend, Peter, to pretend to be Michael and the two of them had gone to the Wing Fan Bank where Michael had a safety deposit box. She had forged Michael's signature while the bank official was not looking and then let Peter give the paper to the official. The two of them had been escorted to the safety deposit box and the bank official had been happy to turn the box over to the them. She had stuffed the contents into the expensive brief case that Peter had carried. Mostly papers, but also about a thousand dollars in American money. Peter had smiled, thinking that the money was what Faith was after. As soon as they exited the bank, she took the brief case, then thanked Peter with a kiss and hug, and dashed off bound for her office at Hong Kong Baptist. She was happy to find that Michael was a creature of great predictability. Once in her office she had looked over her find and come into possession of documents that now provided her with all the information she needed to identify and, she hoped, access Michael's Swiss bank account. The account was with the InterBank of Switzerland and the account number was 72015007F. Michael had scribbled the word *birthday* next to the long number. The documents also provided her with an accounting of the total funds on deposit in the account. She had almost fainted. Well, that's not really correct, but she did swoon a bit, and exhaled a long sigh. In fact, she had been almost giddy. That had been almost two weeks ago. She did not know where Michael was and did not believe he was coming back. Samuel was trying frantically to find him, but Hong Kong is a small place and if he was in Hong Kong it was unlikely a Brit like Michael could

have remained hidden for so long. She felt certain something had happened to him, something bad. She could not just wait around to find out what. On the other hand, perhaps he had left Hong Kong and already gotten the money, although the presence of the documents indicated that this was not the case. In any event, she had spent the intervening weeks trying to plan out how she might get her hands on the money in that account. At the least, she might find out if Michael was still alive. That's what she told herself. In any event, she now felt fairly certain that she could do it, but there were risks. She had to have help and in this case Peter would just not do. And she could not even tell Samuel what she was up to.



Jay made his bed with military precision, smoothing the blanket compulsively. On the night table next to the bed was a framed photo of him from his high school years. He was in a black gi and receiving a rather large trophy for winning a martial arts tournament in Chicago, where he was then living with his father's brother who had moved there from Belize. Although he spent the largest part of his childhood traveling from one relative to another, it was his time in Arkansas that weighed most heavily in his memory. He had spent his first nine years there. He had first seen his father there. A boy of kaleidoscopic origins in a land where everything was evaluated in black and white. He was still saddened when he thought about the reasons for his moving to Chicago. He had moved when his great aunt died. He was fourteen and had been back living with her for less than a year. His uncle had come to Cotton Plant to take him North, by train. Shirtless, Jay made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth and shower.

Afterwards, Jay made his way into the small kitchen. He clicked on the cassette tape in the CD/tape player on the counter and Freda Payne began belting out *Band of Gold*. The tape had been a gift from Helen. He opened the refrigerator and took out a small plastic container that said Band-Aid. He opened it and turned it upside down and a gold ring fell out. He slipped the band on the appropriate finger of his left hand and frowned. He never liked wearing the damn thing, but thought it might come in handy today. He took a cup out of the cupboard and checked on Mister Coffee. Done. He poured the black liquid into the cup and tasted it. Too hot. Just right. *Since you been gone all that's left is a band of gold*. He thought about breakfast but the will wasn't there and he left the kitchen with his cup. He went to the window near his electric trainset and the empty bluish fish tank and looked out at the morning haze and the adjacent buildings. This morning he would finish his report on property development in Malaysia and Indonesia. The foreign funds that had poured into Southeast Asia during the 1990s had produced a huge speculative boom in real estate. All sorts of firms had diverted personnel and money from more productive uses to real estate because of the boom. Hotels, condominiums, you name it, as long as it required a construction crew, that's where the easy money was. This sort of speculation always ended badly. Jay was convinced that this time would not be any different. Nevertheless, he knew that the foreign speculators, like Simon Rekker, could make a bad situation into a disaster. He sipped his coffee. From the kitchen came the sound of *Too Late to Turn Back Now* by the Cornelius Brothers and Sister Rose. *Smooth melody. Nice tape*. He smiled affectionately. Sometimes Helen could be surprising.



"Do you ever tell the truth?" Helen asked Sanjay, as he was about to bite into an egg-roll. She sat, arms folded, leaning back in the chair on one side of the table in the small open-air restaurant. He stopped and looked her straight in the eyes, but did not respond. She just shook her head. "You don't, do you?"

Jay put down the eggroll and made this sort of smacking sound with his lips, looked around, and then at her with what could only be interpreted as annoyance. "What do you want from me, Helen?" He leaned forward, reconnecting those laser beam eyes with hers. "Come on, you and I are the same. We both know what we want and we go after it. Es todo. Why you want to make it seem complicated, like this was about love or some shit like that?" He wasn't sure why he said that. He thought it sounded like some cheap movie line, wondered if maybe that's where it had come from, old programming.

Helen shook her head, got up from the table without another word and just walked away.



The Mad Dog Pub was a nice place to get a good drink. Jay met Graham Carville there and the two made their way to relatively quiet table in the back and ordered two beers.

"So, how's life in Big Blue?" Jay asked.

"IBM is IBM," Graham replied.

"Si, I can understand that. The nine to five grind isn't any easier just because they pay you a ton of green, huh?" Jay adjusted his chair to gain a better view of the room, yet seem to be watching only Graham.

"Who said they're paying me a ton of money?"

Jay smiled. "You should quit and start your own company, Graham."

"Right," he said. "You going to finance it?"

Jay shrugged. "If I had the dinero, maybe," Jay said and drank from his beer mug.

This brought a smile to Graham's face. "That's so sweet, Jay," he said and reached across the table to touch Jay's hand.

"What are friends for?"

Graham nodded. "Right," he said.

"So what'd you find out?"

"Oh," Graham said, remembering the question Jay had asked him on the telephone. "I looked into it and the machines were all from Wing Fan Bank. Not only that, but Wing Fan recently leased an RS/5000 for six months. That's a short term lease, but they paid a premium. Seems strange that the bank would need a supercomputer for such a short period of time."

"Interesting."

"What do you need the information for?"

"HKTDC is working on a special report on the rate of adoption of computer technology in Hong Kong."

Graham looked skeptical. "What do you really need the information for, Jay?"

Jay sighed. "The governor wants to know if supercomputer technology is being used surreptitiously by

the mainland government via proxies here in Hong Kong."

Graham smiled. "Well, of course they are," he said, shaking his head. "You'd think the British administration of this place would have been on that a long time ago. What incompetents."

"Don't be too harsh, Graham, they did have the foresight to put me on the job."

Graham's smile widened. "Well, I'm just glad I could help."

"Keep this hush-hush."

"Of course." After a pause, in which he stared into his beer mug, Graham looked up and asked, "You want to come back to my place and give me another shot at beating you at Madden Football?"

Jay smiled. "Wish I could, Graham, but you know how it is. Old ball and chain." He wiggled the finger with the gold band. "Besides, you're never gonna beat me, so just let it go."

"There's other things we could do."

Jay shook his head. "Raincheck."

Graham nodded. "I'll take what I can get."



Helen watched Jay on the closed circuit channel on her television. He waved to the camera. When he came upstairs, she was waiting in her doorway.

"Got any food?" Jay asked as he approached the door.

She stepped aside to let him walk into the apartment. "How did you know I would let you in?" She asked, but he just smiled. She closed the front door and went to the kitchen. Malcolm was sitting at the kitchen table playing with a toy notebook computer. The notebook wanna-be talked back to him as he tried answering math questions. The television was on and a Cantonese movie was playing.

"Hi, Malcolm," Jay said. Malcolm looked up and smiled. "You have a car, yet?" "Not yet."

Helen rattled around in the kitchen for a few minutes then said, "I have some stale cookies."

"No thanks," Jay said, plopping onto the sofa in front of the television set.

"I could make you something. You want me make some dumplings?"

"I don't want to be any trouble," he said.

"Jay, men like you always trouble," she said, placing her hands on her hips for emphasis.

"I love being reduced to a stereotype," he gave her a mock frown. "How about an apple?"

"Okay," she said, "that I've got," and brought in an apple that was a bit on the old side, but only had one brown spot. He took the apple and bit into it with a crunch. She joined him on the sofa. "What's this?"

She asked, arching her back and pointing to the ring on his finger.

"Oh," he said. He had forgotten to remove the band after his meeting with Graham Carville. "It's a prop. I had a meeting with a woman --- very espantoso --- who wants to jump on my bones. It's my security blanket. Keeps me from being hassled."

"You expect me to believe that?" She frowned. "You just happen to have a wedding ring?"

"Come on, Helen, be serious. Could I be spending this much time with you if I was married?"

"Yes," she replied, without hesitation.

"Well, I'm not married." He took off the ring and slipped it into his pocket. He showed her his finger.

"See no tell-tale marks. It was a prop, that's all. Es todo."

"You need to chill on the Spanish," she said. "I don't know what you're saying half the time."

"Lo siento," He said smiling, then, "Okay, okay. I'll try." He crunched into the apple.

"So, so why you don't come to my party?"

He spoke through a mouthful of apple, "We already talked about that." He watched her watching him and, for the first time in their relationship he saw a kind of suspicion that was deeper, more serious.

She just stared at him, then after a pause, changed the subject. "You see the big protest march today?"

"What protest march?"

"The Democrats organized a protest against the Basic Law because it doesn't protect the people's rights to elect the Hong Kong government. There were also some pro-Tibet activists."

"I missed it," he said.

"What do *you* think about the basic law?"

He shrugged. "I don't think about it."

"What does that mean? You live here."

He looked at her. She seemed on the verge of one of her tirades, he thought. "One hundred and fifty years of British rule and now the Democrats discover the importance of popular elections. Seems a day late, if you ask me."

"How can you say that?"

He looked at his apple and sighed. He put the apple down on an advertising flyer that Helen had taken out of the newspaper and placed on the coffee table. He leaned back and stared into Helen's eyes. "You becoming political, Helen?"

"I just want to know your opinion, that's all."

"I like to keep my objectivity. It makes my work easier."

"This isn't Trade Development business," she said. "I just want to know what you think. I'm your friend,

not a business associate. Right?"

"Life's too short to worry about things you can't change."

"That sound very cynical. You must care about something, Jay."

"You mean something other than my own well-being?"

"You Americans never want to take anything seriously."

"So I'm just another American now?"

"I didn't say that."

"I care about you, Helen. After all this time, you should at least know that."

She shook her head. "I don't know that," she was being honest. "Sometime I think maybe you just using me, that you no different from Hong Kong men."

"Another stereotype," he said with a certain enthusiasm. "I'm rapidly becoming a cartoon character."

She smiled. "Garfield the Cat."

Jay smiled back and nodded knowingly. "Yeah, I could be Garfield. That would be the life."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up into his eyes. "You still love me, Garfield?"

"Por supuesto, te quiero," he said and kissed her forehead.



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CHAPTER NINE: Dream Time

Dream Time

He had fallen asleep on the sofa, rain had been falling hard outside when he had drifted into the nether world of dreams. He had crossed the threshold between the waking world and the dream world so suddenly that his consciousness had hardly kept pace and when he found himself walking down the darkened hallway, he could have easily mistaken it for the world of the wide awake. He had been awakened by the sound of clacking. Someone was working on a computer keyboard and the sound was so loud it had reached across the dream distance to the sofa. He was following the sound down this hallway. The hallway was longer than usual and less straight. He wound his way to Michael and Faith's bedroom. He stepped into the doorway, stopping on the threshold. Moonlight illuminated the white and bloated face of Michael, who peered at him with hollow black eyes. *His eyes are brown, not black.* Michael's hands hovered over the keyboard and he seemed annoyed to have been interrupted. His hair was soaking wet and water droplets trickled down the pale face from the water-limp hair. He opened his mouth to speak and Samuel waited expectantly to hear why Michael had been gone and where. But the only sound that came forth was the sound of a hollow hiss that drifted in the dream-dark air like the sound of death itself. Samuel awoke, shaking, grasping at the sofa back, pulling himself up, heart racing, eyes leaking tears.



Hard Rain

Thick gray-black clouds drifted over the KL sky bringing a hard rain.

“What’s in the closet?” Xarmina asked her brother, trying to look over his shoulder.

He was leaning into the closet in his parent's bedroom, territory that was strictly off-limits. He and Xarmina had sneaked into the room while Crystal was washing clothes. He had done this before, but this was a new and frightening adventure for Xarmina.

“What's in there?” Xarmina strained to see into the dark closet, keeping behind her brother, but her curiosity growing. "Let me see."

Hussein held the flask up and showed his sister. He smiled when she made the oohing sound. "I told you it was beautiful," he said. He turned and held it towards Xarmina. She touched it, asked what it was. He shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"Let me see it," Xarmina said. He gave it to her and after a brief inspection, she opened it. She held it to her nose. "It smells funny," she said. "Like perfume."

"Let me see." Hussein took it back from his sister and smelled it. He smiled. "I think it is to drink."

Xarmina shook her head. "I don't think so," she said, but then she saw the look on his face. "You know what it is, don't you?"

He nodded. "It's liquor," he said boldly.

"Liquor?" He nodded again and Xarmina frowned. "Liquor," she repeated, looking at the flask. "Why would mother and father have liquor in the closet?"

"Maybe adults drink liquor at night," he guessed. He smiled. "Should we try some?"

For a moment, Xarmina thought of the proper thing to do, now that the improper thing had been done. They should put back the flask, close the closet door, and leave. "Yes," she said boldly. "But you first."

Hussein hesitated. He looked at his sister, then at the flask. He opened it and took a tiny sip.

Xarmina laughed as Hussein made a sour face and stuck out his tongue. He said that he thought perhaps it was spoiled, but she took the flask anyway and she tried some. It made her chest tingle. She laughed.

"Do you think it is okay to drink?" He asked. She nodded and took a bigger swallow. He reached for it and she pushed his hand away. "It's my turn," he said. Reluctantly she shared the flask.

"Don't drink too much or they will know," she warned.

When they heard Crystal calling for them, Xarmina took the flask, replaced the top and put it back where Hussein had found it, inside a basket underneath a pile of Izmeen's underthings. She closed the closet door and hurried her brother out of the bedroom.

Crystal caught up with the two children in the hallway. "What are you up to?" She asked, recognizing the look of mischief. They giggled and then ran past her towards the kitchen.

"Hussein," she called out. "Xarmina!" She ran after them.

They ran through the kitchen and out a rear door that led into the garden.

Crystal called to them again and followed them out into the garden.

The gardener had moved out of the children's way but right into Crystal's path as she hurtled out the door. She bumped into one side of the elderly man and sent him flying onto the grass to one side of the path.

She stopped chasing the children and apologized. She reached down and helped the man up. She had a very worried look on her face, as if he might be broken somehow, but he started to laugh.

"You're very strong for a woman," he said, patting his arms. "I like strong women."

"Where did they go?" She did not have time for nonsense.

"They're just playing games," he said.

She called to them again.

Hussein stuck his head out from one of the hedges and there was more giggling. "You have to catch us," the boy said, and then was gone again.

The gardener shook his head. "Just let them tire out and they will come looking for food and juice. If you chase them, they will never tire of it." Crystal smiled. She knew that he was right. *Don't let the rich kids turn you into another one of their toys.* She thanked him and went back inside the house.



The Dojo

The floor of the dojo had subtle ripples from the constant and repetitious practice. Jay planted his feet firmly on the canvas and made himself ready for the attack. The man in the white gi leapt towards him, snapping a kick that Jay smoothly dodged, then planted his own kick firmly into the other man's ribs sending him groaning to the canvas with a loud thud.



Day Dreams

"somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond any experience, your eyes have their silence:

*in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near" e.e.cummings*

In a final slow pattering, the rain had stopped. The gray sky folded upon itself, clouds morphing into torn cotton balls. The colors of the sky seemed clarified, more vivid, after the rain. The world seemed brighter, like a digital image compared to the normal analog version.

As Jay walked down the glistening sidewalk through the South Horizon complex, he was day dreaming about a time when he was a little boy walking down a dusty road in Cotton Plant, Arkansas watching the muddy currents of the Dixie River rushing by. No world could possibly have been more vivid than the Arkansas of his childhood. He had stopped and thrown a broken branch into the hurried waters, swollen by recent rains, and watched the branch moving in a dancing motion away. Many times Jay could not quite fathom how he had gotten from that moment in time and space to this moment and this place.

Jay pushed the button on the panel and waited for Helen to respond. He knew that she could see him from her television set. She told him the door was open and moments later he heard the sound of the automated latch retracting. He opened the door, waved at the long faced security guard and went to the elevator, trailing wet footprints. He appeared at Helen's door, wet from walking in the rain without an umbrella, but smiling.

Helen, dressed in a blue mini-skirt and beige blouse, invited him in and he waved to Malcolm, Helen's five year old, who only briefly looked up from a Cantonese cartoon on the television.

"Say hello to Jay," she told her son, using her do-what-you're-told voice and the little boy said hello.

Jay said hi to Malcolm, then plopped down on the leather sofa.

"I've got to go back to the office in about an hour," he said.

"It's Saturday," Helen said from the kitchen, where she was getting him a beer from the refrigerator. "I thought you had Saturday off this week."

"Doesn't matter," he said, "I've got to finish some stuff for a report on China's export growth in the last quarter. I don't know why I do it. The reports are always the same. Exports up sharply."

Malcolm had stopped looking at the television for a moment and was staring at Jay. Malcolm stuck out his lower lip and said, "Did you bring me anything?"

Jay shook his head. "Sorry, man, I didn't bring anything this time." Malcolm seemed disappointed and turned back to the television. Jay watched him and smiled. "Next time I'll bring you a toy."

Malcolm looked up and smiled. "Really?" Jay nodded.

"Malcolm!" Helen said. She seemed irritated, as she came back into the living room holding the cold bottle of imported German beer in one hand and some sort of toy in the other: the toy looked like some sort of space gun. "I've told you about leaving your stuff in the kitchen." She tossed the space gun on the carpet near Malcolm, who just looked at it without moving. She gave the beer to Jay and said, "You gave that to him."

"He's just five years old, Helen," Jay said.

She huffed and then sat down next to him. "He needs a father."

This was a subject that Jay was not ready to discuss. "You do just fine," Jay said. He noticed the way she was looking at him and he shook his head. "Don't get ideas," he said. "I gave up on marriage, kids, two car garages in the suburbs, and all that goes with it when I left the Young Americans for Freedom." She frowned. "A conservative organization back in the States," he answered her unspoken query. "I was a chapter president, with delusions of something much grander." He shrugged. "Then I grew up."

"You were into politics?" He nodded. She smiled. "Well, Hong Kong and politics don't mix."

"And that's fine by me," he said. "I could care less about politics these days."

"I've noticed," she said with a hint of sadness. "You are becoming a real Hong Kong man."

Malcolm picked up the space gun and pointed it at the television.

Jay smiled and took a swallow of the beer. "What'd you want to see me about, Helen?" Malcolm turned and looked at Jay. Jay winked and Malcolm smiled.

"You remember that march in Washington, D.C. All the stuff about *atonement* and brothers helping brothers and stuff. The Million Man March."

Jay's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about, Helen? Are you now thinking of joining the Nation of Islam?" He shook his head. "Louis Farrakhan? I wasn't *that* sort of conservative. But I did read that Farrakhan recently traveled through Hong Kong. Is that why you're asking?"

She shook her head. "Jay, you always act like you don't care about racism," she said. "But I remember how pissed off you got when you saw that *Sambo* toothpaste in that convenience store in Mong Kok. You told the store owner he was a racist. Probably scared him witless. So don't pretend that you don't care."

"I never said I didn't care about racism, Helen. What's that got to do with the Million Man March?"

"I need you to help someone."

"Help someone?" He shrugged. "A brother?" He asked this with a tone of sarcasm.

"Yes."

"So, what kind of brother is this exactly, Helen?"

"He's British. His name is Samuel Maxwell. He's living just down the hall."

"Down the hall?"

"Yes."

"I thought I knew who lived on this floor. I don't remember any *brother*."

"He's Michael Maxwell's brother," she blinked at Samuel, now feeling a little self-conscious about the word brother. "Michael Maxwell has gone missing, but Samuel staying at his place."

"Sounds like a problem for *your* brother, Martin," Jay said. "I'm sure the Royal Hong Kong constabulary can find a missing Brit. And, besides, if he is Maxwell's brother, then how is he a *brother*?"

"He's adopted," she said.

"Adopted? An adopted brother? Lives down the hall? Black or whatever?"

"Not whatever," she said, feeling frustrated. "He's British and he's black."

"Okay," he said, tiring of the game. "And what has any of this to do with me?"

"I thought maybe you help find him."

"Really? Helen, what have I done to make you think I'm in the finding missing brother's business?"

"I asked Martin to help, but I think he's just blowing this off. All he cares about now is getting his money together and moving to Canada. He's already sent Mei Ling and the kids. So I thought maybe you could help. I thought you might have friends who could do some looking around or something."

"So you told your brother about this *brother* who has a brother who is missing and he did nothing, nada?"

She blinked a couple of times, growing a bit tired of Jay's sarcasm, then nodded.

"I don't have those sorts of contacts, Helen. He's better off with the police."

"But I already told you Martin won't help. Maybe you talk to Samuel."

Jay's frown deepened. "I'm not a cop," he said. "Talk to Martin again." Jay took two large swallows of the beer. "I am not a detective and, in case you've forgotten, I'm still a foreigner here."

"You could at least talk to Samuel," she said, trying not to get angry.

He put down the beer bottle, got up and walked to Helen's window, which had a similar view to the one from Michael and Faith's apartment. He turned around and looked at Helen. Her apartment was typical of the apartments in the building, not that different from what you would find in the other buildings in South Horizon, or in any number of middle-class to upper-middle-class complexes in Hong Kong. The apartment was sparsely furnished. Who in Hong Kong spends time at home, anyway? What furniture there was could be described as sturdy but rather compact in dimensions. Space was always at a premium in all but the most expensive flats. He sighed again. Helen knew way too much about his life, he thought, despite the fact that she didn't really know all that much, mostly bits and pieces from the rare moments when he was talkative. Nevertheless, she had a way of cutting through the mist and seeing a bit too clearly. His sixth sense was heightened and he was concerned that Helen was talking to him about the Maxwell brothers. *What does she know?* "So, any theories about the missing brother?"

"You mean, does anyone have any idea where he went?" She asked and Jay nodded. "No," was her short response. "I'm sure Michael Maxwell would have told Faith or somebody at his work if he was going to be away when his brother came into Hong Kong. Maybe he was kidnapped."

"Isn't that a bit melodramatic? Besides, if he was kidnapped someone would ask for a ransom."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I guess you right. It's just very strange. He don't seem like the kind of person who would just run off. But I guess you can never really tell about people, especially men." She saw the frown return to Jay's face and smiled. "Men can be so selfish and flaky," she said, rubbing salt on the wound.

But this added comment only made Jay smile. He knew Helen was frustrated, but this also meant she was

once again displaying her very un-Hong Kong personality. He liked this about Helen. As for Michael Maxwell, Jay suspected that Rekker had stashed him out of sight until his shenanigans were completed. He looked at Helen: *How can you grow up in Hong Kong and be so naive?* “Helen,” he said.

“Yes, Jay?”

He shook his head, then went back to the sofa. “You still have that game on your computer?”

“The one you spent half a Sunday playing? The one you played for so long that I couldn't finish revising the Monetary Authority report until almost midnight?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“*Civilization*,” she said. “It’s still there.”

He nodded, then let her tell him the rest of what she knew about Samuel and Michael Maxwell.



Harsh Sunlight

Harsh sunlight was like pearls of radiation glistening on the blue waves of the straits. Ali Jamal stood on the balcony of his white washed colonial era mansion looking out at the water. In his right hand was a cell phone that he held to his right ear, listening intensely to the words of his deputy, Fadil Hamzah. “No, no, no, Fadil, I assure you the problems in Thailand won’t have much effect on us. Don’t worry about it. American, British, and French bankers and financiers understand the difference between Thailand and Malaysia. The Thais haven’t been very responsible about managing their foreign exchange reserves and now they’re getting their comeuppance. It has nothing at all to do with us.” He listened for a while, then said, “I’ll talk to Mohamed. Don’t worry.” Again, he listened. “Yes, I understand. I’m counting on you Fadil. All right.” And he removed the phone from his ear and clicked it off. For the first time, Ali Jamal considered the problems in Thailand to be of more importance to Malaysia than he had previously thought. Fadil Hamzah was a political dinosaur, but he was not stupid. Ali Jamal recalled a line from *MacBeth*: *By the pricking my thumb, something wicked this way comes.*



Nathan Road

Nathan Road at night. Bright lights. Stores glowing like holidays. People moving in both directions in long streams of humanity. A beautiful Mosque. Jay moved through the stream with self-confidence. He kept his eyes on the back of Samuel’s head. Samuel, feeling watched, moved quickly but somewhat more awkwardly through and sometimes with the crowd. He began to feel a sense of apprehension. A hand reached out for the bulge in Samuel’s back pocket. Another hand took hold of that hand. In one swift move Jay twisted the hand that had been trying to remove Samuel’s wallet and the man attached to the

hand stumbled onto the pavement, nearly stepped on by a couple that had not noticed him fall. Samuel turned in that instance and saw what looked like someone who had tripped and fallen and the man with the ponytail looking at him. Samuel frowned. He started to say something, but then the man looked away and walked on past him.



Plum Cookies

Mohamed brooded in his study, staring vacantly at an open book. He was not reading, hardly even aware of what he was looking at. He had a sense of purpose once, but now could not remember what it had been. His stomach was aching again. Sharp pains shot out from below his belly button. He found it harder and harder to concentrate on anything. It was as if his mind was turning to mush.

"Excuse me, sir." Crystal was standing in the doorway with a tray in her hands.

He turned and smiled. He motioned for her to come in. "Please, call me Mohamed," he said.

I'm not going in there, she thought. She extended her arms, but did not move into the room.

"Is this from Izmeen?" He saw the plate of plum cookies. Not more plum cookies, he thought.

Crystal felt like an accomplice, bringing Izmeen's poison cookies to Mohamed, but what else could she do? Let the rich people kill each other. She held out the tray. "I'm sorry to disturb you," she said. He came close to her, very close, and she got that creepy feeling again.

He took the tray. "Are you sure you won't come in and talk?" She immediately shook her head, but for a moment didn't move away. Until he smiled. Then she turned and quickly walked away down the hall.

"Thank you, Crystal." He watched her walk away. She is so shy, he thought. So very shy.



Matchbox Cars

On the floor, Malcolm was playing with the matchbox cars that Jay had given him, while Arnold Swartzenegger ran from a tall, dreadlocked alien on the television set.

Jay stood watching Malcolm. "I can't help your friend," Jay said turning to Helen.

"Why not?"

"He can't be helped," Jay said. "Besides, I've got to go to Malaysia for a few days."

“Malaysia? Why Malaysia?”

“Work.”

She looked at him suspiciously.

“Why the look?” He asked.

“Are you sure this is work? Are you seeing someone else? Maybe someone in Malaysia?”

“Just chill out on that, Helen. This trip isn't for pleasure. It's work.”

Again, the look spread across her face and her eyes narrowed. “Don't give me that.”

“What?”

“So, the Trade Development Council is sending you to Malaysia?”

He shook his head. “No, I'm taking a few days leave of absence.”

She smiled. “Hmmm.”

“Hmmm, what?”

“Another leave of absence,” she said. “You get more leaves than a tree. It isn't like a Hong Kong government agency to give so many leaves of absence.”

“HKTDC isn't a government agency, Helen,” he said. “You, of all people, know that. If I worked for the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, like you, then I'm sure I'd *never* get a leave of absence.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but I don't know anyone who ever worked for the Trade Development Council who got so much freedom, not a Chinese or a foreigner.”

Malcolm got excited when the giant alien tried to zap Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“I'm doing some work for the *Stroup Institute for Freedom and Prosperity*.” He said with a grin. “For once I'll be earning good old American dollars. It's an unpaid leave. HKTDC doesn't lose anything.”

“Except you,” she said quickly. “How will they manage?”

“Are you being sarcastic, Helen?”

“And while you are running about in Malaysia, I will be here alone,” she said. “Just me and Malcolm and this lonely place. Do you care what happens to me? Or do you forget me the moment you leave here?”

“I do love you, Helen.”

“I don't believe you.” Brown eyes fixed on brown eyes, moments out of context, full of possibility.

He shrugged. “I have no control over what you do or do not believe.”

“That's very cold.”

Again, he shrugged. “It's not meant to be.”

“Don't go,” she pleaded. “Please, don't go to Malaysia.”

There followed a bitter drink of silence.

“Forget it,” she said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Forget I said that. What about Samuel?”

Malcolm moved directly in front of the television as the conflict on screen heated up.

Jay rubbed his chin. “He’s not gonna find his brother,” he said. Before she could respond, he added, “That would be my guess. In any case, I don't think his brother is still in Hong Kong.”

Helen blew a silent whistle. “How come you never tell me the truth?”

He did not respond immediately, just stared at her. “Sometimes you remind me of somebody.”

“Who? An old girlfriend?”

“My grandmother in Punta Gorda was really paranoid,” he said. “She never really trusted anybody.”

This time it was Helen who frowned. “Your *grandmother*? I remind you of your *grandmother*?”

He smiled. “Helen, this isn’t a Hollywood movie.” He spread his arms out. “Sometimes you just have to accept life as it is, go with the flow, take what you can get while you can get it.”

She folded her arms across her chest, cocked her head, looked him up and down, and said, “Hmmm. I don't think I like that . . . reminding you of your *grandmother*.”



Talcum Powder

The bathroom smelled of talcum powder. Mona leaned toward the mirror and stared at her eyes, which were bloodshot. It was not simply the long hours laboring on speeches and reports for Ali Jamal. She had trouble sleeping, even when work was relatively light. She had a monster inside trying to tear her apart. She could barely control it. Ironically, she seemed to be waiting for a disaster to happen. If a disaster happened, then she would have something that could distract the monster and perhaps she would be able to sleep.



God's Wish

Samuel sat up in bed, unable to sleep. His anxiety level was off the charts. He had spoken on the telephone at some length with Trudy, Michael's wife. He had never been all that comfortable talking to Trudy, and current conditions did not make it any easier. Trudy had not heard from Michael and seemed

less concerned than she might have been, should have been, but then that was Trudy. Nevertheless, she had offered to come to Hong Kong to help, but Samuel had assured her that such action would not be necessary. He had wanted to say that it would hardly have been helpful. Samuel had never gotten over (as Trudy had suggested he should) the time she had tried to seduce him. His own brother's wife! Their "relationship" had turned somewhat icy after that, at least from Samuel's point of view. He was quite certain that Trudy knew nothing of Faith and was even more certain that such knowledge would not be at all helpful, in any way. He saw something in the doorway. He blinked. The doorway? The window over the bed cast just enough light, but his eyes did not focus right away.

“You’re awake?” It was Faith’s voice.

He squinted and could just make her out. “Faith?”

“I can’t sleep, either,” she said, her voice trembling.

He rubbed his eyes. He felt very tired from too many nights with little sleep. “Yes,” he said. “It’s hard.”

She walked into the room. Once entering the room, she was covered in the weak light from the window and he could see her better. She was wearing a pair of red silk pajamas with an elaborate gold embroidery pattern. The pajamas seemed insubstantial on her small frame. "I don't know what to do," she said, sounding defeated, moving near the foot of the bed. "It was always my worst nightmare that I'd someday find myself alone like this," she said.

"You're not alone, Faith. I'm here and I'm sure Michael will appear at any minute."

She didn't believe him. "I'm sorry for you," she said. "It is more difficult to deal with the disappearance of a brother than of a . . ." She hesitated. "I don't know what I am to Michael."

His mind was so groggy that he could have just as easily been dreaming as experiencing this in reality. “Now, there's no reason to talk about him as if he were never coming back,” he said. "I'm sure everything will turn out right in the end. I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation for all of this and when Michael comes back he'll share that with us.." He wanted to say something comforting. He tried to figure out what he might do to make her feel better. He only half believed what he was saying and she didn't believe it at all. He could tell that. She seemed to want more than simply a verbal comforter. All the same, he was a man of words and thought there must be the right words to make her feel better, to allow her to relax, or something of the sort. But in the end, his mind was just too uncooperative and he found himself saying, “You better get some sleep. You have to teach tomorrow.”

She stood at the foot of the bed for a long moment, even leaned against it for a moment. He could feel the pressure of her body through the mattress. “Why does God make a world where people have to suffer?”

Samuel hesitated. He didn’t believe in God and wanted to just say so. “Maybe it is because God wants us to help each other,” he said instead, still holding on to the belief that words could somehow do the trick.

She thought about this for a moment, once again leaning against the mattress. A magical, dream-like moment passed. They both simultaneously thought of Michael. He thought of Michael looking at him after an argument that had taken place many years before. Michael had looked content in that moment,

despite their having had one of the worst arguments of their life together. And despite the failure of either to apologize or acknowledge being wrong. She remembered Michael standing in his boxer shorts, hairy-chested, the wild barbarian that he was, at the edge of their bed. “Good night,” she said, finally, in a voice akin to that of a person who had made a final offer at an auction knowing a higher bid would be made.

“Good night, Faith.”

He watched the red silk move from the light back to the darkness and heard her walk softly back to her room.



Time Piece

Jay flew to Kuala Lumpur on one of those sleek new Boeings that Singapore Airlines had purchased only recently. The sky outside the little round window was aflame with orange and yellow, a harbinger. He was dressed in a black silk tunic and black slacks. He wore his one indulgence, a blue-faced Rolex, on his wrist. He knew that most people would see the watch and think it nothing more than another of those Hong-Kong knock-offs, and that pleased him. He liked the watch more than he liked the ostentatiousness of wearing it. He just wanted a watch that could be counted on. After all, so little in life was as predictable as a good time-piece.



Lost Faith

The next day Samuel did not see Faith. He got out of bed fairly early and thought she was still in bed. He planned to leave at about 8. Normally Faith would have been up by then, but not today. However, since she did not have to be at work until 11 he assumed she was sleeping late, given that she had trouble sleeping the night before. He caught a double-decker bus to the Central Ferry and decided to call Faith from there. He expected that either she would answer or that the call would wake her. She did not answer. He thought maybe she had gotten up while he was on the bus and left. He caught the Star Ferry to Kowloon. He enjoyed the ride as much as one can when operating on virtually no sleep or food and with a missing brother. In Kowloon he met with a man named Rajiv who offered his services in the search for Michael for a substantial sum of money. Samuel had gotten the reference from Helen Fung. However, he had decided not to pay the man just yet. He had limited funds and this man seemed a bit less than upstanding. He caught a taxi from Kowloon to the British embassy in time for a third appointment there. The embassy officials had gotten to know him, but were no more helpful than in the previous visits, explaining that “there is not much that we can do.” It seemed that this was a popular retort in Hong Kong. He caught a bite to eat at an Indian restaurant attached to a hotel in Central, then used the bus system once again to return to South Horizons on the island of Ap Lei Chau.

Faith did not come home that evening. This was completely out of the ordinary. However, Samuel knew she was distraught and he thought perhaps she had decided to spend the evening with her parents in Kowloon. He took the liberty of going into her bedroom only because he knew that Michael's books were there. He hoped to find something to pass the evening with. What he found was a note written in beautiful script on richly textured yellow paper. In the note Faith explained to Samuel that she was going away for a while and that he should feel free to remain in the apartment as long as he likes. She did not say where she was going or why. He assumed she was trying to find Michael. But why didn't she tell him where she was going? Why didn't she let him help her? Was there some other possibility? He sighed and put the note back on the bed and walked out of the room. He went to the living room and stared out the picture window at the darkening South China Sea.



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