

Being Stripped Naked

Confessions of an Expat in Hong Kong

Adam Peirs

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Chapter 1

Saturday, 22 August 1998: I woke earlier than usual on the weekend, restless in the mists of sleep. The vivid sunshine was coming through the cracks in the curtains. I looked over, and there at my side was Rachel, sleeping soundly as usual whenever she stayed over. Jet-black hair partially covered her face, resembling the half-moon of the previous evening. I stroked away her hair. She didn't move. I had never been to her place, and as I lay there, I wondered what her flat would have been like. I expected that it would have a lot less space than even my little corner of Sheung Wan. Most likely she shared with her friends or work colleagues to keep the cost of living down, so her world was reduced to a room. No surprise that she was more than happy to sleep over.

As I moved my head, the alcohol from the night before rattled around. I sat on the bed momentarily to allow my head to clear. My tongue was stuck to the top of my mouth. I tried to release it, opening my mouth as I did. I pondered if it was possible to stick my tongue to the sand flats of Death Valley. And if I did, would it become immediately dehydrated as it comes into contact with the sand, similar to the way that saliva freezes when it comes into contact with ice? Why did I care? I needed some water and Panadol.

I got out of bed; Rachel didn't move. I walked through the lounge, into the kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cupboard. I walked over to the cooler and filled the glass with water. It disappeared in one go. I refilled the glass, and then I stepped back into the lounge, placing the glass on the dining table.

I broke wind. "My head is not the only thing that needs calming," I said out loud as the smell reached my nostrils. I headed into the bathroom and opened the wall cabinet. I found the Panadol and popped two out of the strip. I closed the cabinet door and looked in the mirror. The reflection was not my face; it was my character. It was a portentous image staring back at me. My dark

brown hair had started to lose its battle against age and was receding gracefully, at least in my humble opinion. My face was starting to give way to those fine lines around the eyes that come with age. I would say wisdom; however, that was debatable. The Asian sun had provided a light dusting of bronze. The body was still in reasonable shape; however, it had been through some brutal nights of binge drinking, and worse. The whites of my eyes were showing more signs of red these days, distracting from the chestnut brown of the iris. The last three years of Hong Kong had been etched onto this body as well as the mind. Though invisible to the eye, my emotions had been no less affected.

I headed back into the lounge and grabbed the glass of water. The two tablets disappeared with the first gulp. The medicine needed to kick in quickly; my head was really starting to thump.

I moved back to the bathroom and turned on the shower. The hiss of the water passing through the showerhead invited me in. The warm water invigorated my body, forcing it to waken. I washed my hair, offering a little massage to my scalp as I did. As the pitter-patter of the water hit my skull, it resonated in my head. A quick blast of the cold water seemed to startle my body into an awakened state. I exited the shower, dried myself off a little bit, tied the towel around my waist, and headed back to the kitchen to see what I could have for breakfast.

Opening the cupboards I found nothing that my body craved. Muesli and yogurt? Healthy, but not what I needed. Toast? Hmm, maybe. Salt and vinegar crisps? Yes, that would do nicely. The grease would help absorb the alcohol. My temples were still throbbing. I grabbed the family pack and opened it, stuffing a few into my mouth as I walked back into the lounge. As I walked over to my desk, I saw the pile of paper that needed to be sorted through and filed as necessary. "Advert, bin. Advert, bin. Bank statement,

file it later. More adverts, bin." I tossed the adverts into the round filing cabinet under the desk.

I looked down at the middle drawer, pulled like a ball bearing to a magnet. It made a light swish as it opened, revealing an envelope addressed to David Mears. A quick look and it was easy to see the Stellenbosch postal stamp, dated 28 July 1997. I pulled out the letter and unfolded it, the creases heavy with age. I paused before reading, trying to work out who was the David Mears this letter was sent to. Would I have recognised him after all these years? After all, in these two or so years, a lot had happened. Perhaps too much to fully comprehend. "Should I read this most private of letters?" My mind mulled over the infringement of privacy. "Of course I have the right to read the letter; it is addressed to me," I concluded.

I settled myself into the chair, ready to read the letter that I had read so many times before. The heartache of when she left me came flooding back, stronger than normal. I had read it so often that I could speak every word without any need of looking at it. I broke off and looked out of the window onto the streets of Sheung Wan. My mind started to wander back to the last day Heloise and I were together. I could still see her face, touch her hands and feel her embrace.

The cool breeze of the air conditioning quickly brought me back into the room. The air conditioning unit rattled as it restarted its cooling routine. Loudly it clanked off. I heard the hum of the tram coming down the road, the ding of its bell to warn other road users of its approach as well as alerting waiting passengers of its imminent arrival. Also on the air was the honking of horns and the rumble of traffic that could be heard from the motorway alongside the harbour, even though my flat was located on the other side of the building, looking towards the Peak.

Hong Kong had changed quite dramatically over the last three years, not only physically from all the reclamation but also

administratively. Hong Kong had also changed me, more than I had imagined possible when I stepped off that plane back in 1995. I was full of excitement as to the discoveries that lay ahead of me. What was I full of now? My mind drifted off once more.

I have been told the first sign of insanity was doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result. “Well, you’ve been doing that for the last twelve months or so, Dave. Hooker after hooker. Did you expect something to change? What were you expecting to find? Certainly not love. Guess what – whatever you were searching for hasn’t worked.” I talked openly to myself. Apparently the second sign of insanity was talking to yourself. Well, I was certainly doing that, big time. I heard voices in my head and responded each time. That voice was coming back once more. As I tried to answer the rhetorical questions, I drifted back to the summer of 1995.

Chapter 2

Wednesday, 26 July 1995: I laid in bed that evening, going over the last few months and how I had actually reached this exciting junction. I had graduated from Northumbria University with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering in May earlier in the year. Somewhere between the drunken evenings and the last four years of lessons, I had actually remembered something and been awarded my degree.

Once I graduated, I had written over one hundred letters looking for work. I received only two replies, neither of which had offered me a job. "Recession" is a word that haunts the construction industry. So I took the opportunity to travel, see some of the world and gain some work experience in the process.

However, I also had another reason to leave. Joanna. I had known her from Sixth Form College where we had gotten together on the odd occasion until finally we ended up in the same university. After one drunken party, we ended up in bed and became an item. After the pressures of revising for degrees and working in bars, we started to drift apart. However, I was unaware as to how far we had drifted. For the graduation party, I had invited her to be my date, my prom queen as it were. I had all expectations that she would be by my side with the rest of the group. Unfortunately, she sat at another table with some guy called Tim, her new boyfriend. Or partner, as she preferred to call him. The words I used to describe him were much less complimentary.

Worse was to come, though. She told me she had been seeing him for several months and had only stayed with me so that I could get through the finals. So when an opportunity presented itself to get away, not just from the UK but also from Joanna, I grabbed it with both hands. That opportunity was Hong Kong. Some politician had decided it was a good idea to increase public

spending on infrastructure projects. It had been all over the news. I wasn't going to complain; this was my escape.

I tried my best to sleep, but my mind was racing. I made a mental check to be sure that everything had been prepared: backpack packed; airplane tickets with my passport; passport in my hidden body wallet; traveller's cheques also in the hidden wallet. I was set to go at first light. My dream was about to become reality.

Chapter 3

Thursday, 27 July 1995: Newcastle: My alarm went off at four o'clock in the morning. I dashed into the bathroom, took a quick shower and got dressed. I headed downstairs to find my mother already dressed and preparing the kitchen table. "Do you want toast or cereal, Dave?" she asked as I walked into the kitchen.

"Just cereal will be fine. Too excited to eat, to be honest," I answered as I opened the fridge and grabbed the milk.

Cereal bowl emptied, teeth brushed and backpack closed, we headed out to the car, throwing my luggage in the boot of my mother's silver Renault 5. The engine roared into life, as much as a Renault 5 could, and off we set along the A191 and then onto the A19, followed by the A1 before taking the A696 to Newcastle International Airport. We pulled into the drop-off area. "I'll just drop you off. It's too much hassle to park in the short-term car park and then have to work out where to pay. Is that OK?" my mother asked without really wanting an answer.

I got out of the car, pushed the button to open the boot and threw my bag over my back. "You alright, pet? All set?" My mum looked at me, and her eyes started to dampen a little.

"Yeah, I'm good. I will be back, you know," I tried to reassure her. "I'm only going over there for a year or so; then I'll be back when the construction market over here picks up," I continued, but it was obviously not helping.

"It's the 'or so' that worries me," she stated openly. "I think you may stay there longer than you think. Anyway, remember to write; you know what you're like." That always rankled me when she said that, but I decided to let it pass.

"Will do, I promise." We had our final embrace. As I walked away, I turned around for one last look. My mother had turned her head and was reaching for her paper handkerchief, shoulders moving up and down. It was hard for me to understand how it felt

to watch your child walk away, never knowing when you would see them again. As for me, it was only to be for a year.

My chosen route was to take British Airways from Newcastle to London Heathrow; from there I would take Air India to Hong Kong, which included stopovers in Bombay and New Delhi, and finally arrive in Hong Kong some 360 days later. OK, it was a slight exaggeration, but by the time I arrived in Hong Kong, some thirty-six hours later door to door, it seriously did feel like 360 days. The reason for choosing this route was simple. It was half the price of a direct ticket, and as I had no guarantee of a job when I arrived, saving cash was high on my agenda.

“Morning; I have a ticket from Newcastle to London with British Airways, where I transfer to Air India to Hong Kong.” I placed my tickets and passport on the counter, looking at the young man behind the desk.

He extended his hand, picked up my passport, gave it a cursory look and confirmed, “Mr Mears, one seat on the nine fifteen to Heathrow. OK, you’ll have to collect your bags in Heathrow and check in again when you arrive,” he advised, without paying much attention to me. “Here’s your boarding pass, seat fourteen A, boarding time eight forty a.m. at Gate Ten Forty-Six. Have a nice flight,” and he pushed the button. I watched my backpack disappear down the luggage belt.

We touched down in Heathrow at 10:46 a.m., a little later than expected, but I was unconcerned as my flight to Bombay was due to depart at 12:55 p.m., giving me a little more than three hours to collect my luggage, check in and grab some lunch. I headed straight to the luggage carousel and pulled off my backpack before making my way to the check-in desk.

After a short wait, I got to the counter. “Hi, I have a seat from London to Hong Kong, via Bombay for Mr Mears, Mr David Mears.” I presented my ticket and passport.

“Ah yes, Mr Mears. Do you have any luggage with you?” the young Indian girl asked in a heavy South London accent.

“Only this backpack,” I said as I swung it onto the weighing machine.

“OK, if you can put that into the oversized baggage counter just over there,” she pointed to her right, “and here are your boarding passes. The flight leaves from Gate Fifty-Three at twelve fifty-five, arriving in Bombay at two fifty tomorrow morning local time. You have a four-hour stopover in Bombay—lucky you, eh,” she smiled playfully at me, “before departing Bombay for New Delhi at seven a.m. local time, arriving nine fifteen a.m. local time and then departing New Delhi ten fifteen a.m. local, arriving Hong Kong at one in the morning local time on Friday the twenty-ninth.” She finally concluded my itinerary.

“Perfect,” was all I could really say; my mind was already confused by all those time zones I was about to traverse.

“Remember to check your boarding gate at Bombay, and you will need to stay on the plane in New Delhi. Hope you have a pleasant flight,” she said. I was left to take my bag to the oversized counter, where I placed it once more upon a weighing table. The gent had a quick look at the label and nodded that all was in order before it disappeared from my view once more.

I passed through the immigration area with little trouble and finally embarked on my great adventure. I grabbed a quick sandwich and coffee before I headed out to explore the airport. While walking around Heathrow, I noticed a machine that printed business cards immediately. “Wow, that will be pretty cool to arrive with some business cards ready to hand out.” I spoke out loud and started to read the instructions. “Looks simple enough,” I concluded. “Why wait, Dave my boy—let’s do it!”

Name? the machine asked. I typed in “David Mears.” Telephone number? was the next question. “No idea, so let me ignore that,” and I pushed for the next question. Address? “Again,

no idea, so I'll ignore you, too." I was starting to think it would not be that impressive after all. However, I had already paid the money, so I might as well finish. Qualifications? "Aha, one I can answer," and I proceeded to type in "BSc Civil Engineering." The final question presented itself: job title? I typed in "Professional Engineer." Well, what else could I have written? After all, I had only just graduated a few weeks earlier. And print!

I waited, waited, and waited while the machine churned over and printed and cut the cards, finally depositing said cards into the tray. This was a fairly proud moment, in all honesty. My first business cards. All right, there was some information missing, but it did say "Proffesional..." What! Proffesional! Oh bollocks, I'd spelt it wrong! I had no time and no money to repeat the process. All I could do was to dump them into the bin next to the machine. Oddly enough, it appeared that I was not the only one who had done this, as many other cards lay superfluous to the owners' previous expectations. Maybe other travellers had rushed through the process, like me, only to realize their folly when the cards were printed. Maybe it should have been renamed the "Bollocks Business Card Printing Machine."

A melodious voice broke my distress. "Can all passengers for British Airways Flight BA-one-thirty-nine to Bombay please make their way to Gate Fifty-Three for boarding?" I looked up and scanned the departures screen. It was my flight that was being called for boarding. This was it. This was farewell to jolly old Blighty and off to destinations new. Would I come back? Would I be back after only a couple of weeks, failing to find work, the metaphoric tail between my legs? After all, I had no job waiting for me in Hong Kong. Would it all be a waste of time or an adventure of a lifetime? Well, I was about to find out. I boarded my plane to Hong Kong.

Chapter 4

Saturday, 29 July 1995: The plane touched down at a little after one a.m. local time Hong Kong. I tried to work out what time it was back home, but the thirty-plus hours of travel had slowed my brain to that of a sloth. However, I had arrived at Kai Tak, an airport through which some thirty million other passengers passed through every year, which made it the third busiest airport in the world at the time. Those numbers also provided the territory with its uniquely cosmopolitan character. As a young man who, despite having travelled around Europe and the United States, now found myself in the mayhem of humanity with around another six and a half million people trying to eke out a living and most of all trying to find some space in a “country” of just over one thousand square kilometres, I could see how Hong Kong got its name as one of the most populous countries in the world.

I waited by the carousel for my backpack, slung it over my back when it arrived and then headed for the exit. I needed to find out how to get to Central from here. This was a task made harder due to the fact that I was wearing my glasses. I usually wore contact lenses, but due to the long flight, I decided against putting them in. I obediently followed the signs for taxis until I saw the double sliding doors in the near distance. I exited the terminal building and was greeted by what at first I thought was thick fog! I quickly realized that I had just walked out into 100 per cent humidity, but wasn't even raining.

This best summed up Hong Kong in the summer. Hot, humid and sticky. Glasses and humidity are not the best mix, especially when walking with no idea of the direction I needed to be going. Bang! “Fuck!” Didn't see that trolley in my way. It had hit me on the shin. I rubbed it, hoping that my hand possessed some magical powers that would make the pain disappear. I

limped along, removing my glasses and rubbing my eyes, again hoping my hands possessed some magical powers.

The humidity was not the only impression that those first few steps in Hong Kong brought. The smell of the air was different. Hong Kong derived its name from the Cantonese Heung Gong. This loosely translates into “fragrant harbour.” However, I was unable to detect any floral notes. If, as I suspect, it was coming from the harbour, then I doubted I would be doing much swimming in the waters of the territory. People had told me that it was the smell of money. While I had never been so lucky as to be coated with money while growing up, I had certainly smelt my fair share of it. It didn’t smell like that, either. However, it was a smell very specific to this city. A sweet, sticky smell that I learnt was never absent for long. Maybe when one went hiking in the hills and countryside of the New Territories, it would disappear, but soon you were overwhelmed by it upon your return to the populated areas.

I was also taken aback by the sheer intensity of the people. Or was it just the feeling of intensity. Everything was happening at breakneck speed. People were walking quickly, more rapidly than I had experienced before. It was very different from my stopover in Bombay, where people simply wandered around, groups of people following the one at the front, very much the same way a herd of animals would simply follow the leader. However, here in Hong Kong, people walked with purpose, with energy. There appeared to be little in the way of brotherly love – more self-preservation. No one held a door for the person behind him or her. People didn’t even look up to see if they were going to walk into you as they buried their heads in the daily financial figures while trying to catch their planes.

Then I saw the lights of Hong Kong, dazzling like a kaleidoscope. There is nothing quite like the lights shining along the northern side of Hong Kong Island. All the way from Sheung Wan to Quarry Bay, like one immense electrical bulb trying to draw

me in like a moth to its death. The colours, the displays, the signs, the imagination that went into creating the spectacular in front of me, playing with my mind to imagine that the impossible was indeed possible. Though I may have grown up in a small town outside of Newcastle, I had visited London on several occasions. If London was the graceful old lady, elegant, refined and intelligent, Hong Kong was that dangerous, brash rebel determined to lead me astray, corrupt and satisfy my every desire no matter the persuasion or perversion. This was the city that would not take kindly to being judged and in return would not pass judgment on me or my sins. In fact, it may have allowed more tolerance the greater my sin. Who would have known, as I stood there taking it all in, that I was going to push Hong Kong to its limits in the same way it would push me to mine? It was a battle that I was destined to lose against such a mighty adversary.

I found a taxi. "Fourteen-eighteen Staunton Street, Central, Hong Kong Island, please," I said. Fatigue was starting to take its toll. I sank into the seat; my head lolled from side to side as the taxi moved off. "You want I take you Eastern Tunnel or Central Tunnel?" the driver enquired. My response was as quick as it was stupid "I have no idea; whichever way is best." Mark, the friend I was going to stay with, told me the taxi ride should take around twenty minutes, depending on traffic. The roads were clear but somehow I arrived thirty-five minutes after leaving the terminal building. Accepting my folly, I paid over the money, opened the door, wiped my spectacles once more, grabbed the backpack from the boot and headed towards the metal-gated entrance. I looked up and saw some Chinese characters alongside the letters A to E. I pressed the buzzer next to C and heard a deep voice.

"Yeah, who is it? You know what time it is?"

"Yes, Mark, I do. You going to let me in, or shall I head off to find a hostel?"

"Hey, Dave, come on up."

The door clicked open, and I walked up to the first floor and followed the light flooding out of one of the doorways and into the hall. "Hi Mark, thanks for letting me bunk down for a week or so, very much appreciated," I said as I entered the lounge.

"No problem, Dave; all I can offer you is the sofa, though. However, it should be good enough until you can get yourself sorted out with a job and a place of your own." There was a blanket bundled on the sofa, a pillow resting on top. As he was an architect, he also knew the state of the market.

Mark gave me some headlines as to the potential that awaited me. There was the new airport at Chep Lap Kok plus the various roads, bridges and metro lines being constructed to connect it to the rest of Hong Kong. "I think you are right. This is pretty much the holy grail of construction," I reflected, but not before my body started to sway as the travel started to overtake me once more.

"Look, I'll leave you to it. I'm up at six a.m. so will try to be quiet. There's a pillow and blanket over there, and the sofa has a pull-out bed," he said, pointing as he talked.

It was heading towards the early hours of Saturday morning, and my head was spinning. I pulled out my toothbrush and headed to the bathroom. I considered having a shower but the physical energy I lost just thinking about it quickly displaced the idea from my mind. I headed back to the lounge, pulled out the blanket, placed my head on the pillow and fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep.

Chapter 5

Saturday, 29 July 1995: I looked at my watch. It informed me that it was 11:30 a.m. There was horn honking on the road outside, which had woken me up. I threw the blanket back, got to my feet and peered out through the window. Opposite was a five-floor building with grey mosaic tiles with light red bands for a façade, presumably residential, from the looks of the bamboo poles hung outside one of the windows, supporting the laundry. Looking to the left, I saw several signs advertising a shop or restaurant on the ground floor. In the distance there were some high-rise buildings, similar in height to those I was in awe of when I visited New York City. To the right was a similar scene. Looking down at the noise emanating from the road, I could see that a taxi had stopped to drop off his fare. Unfortunately the delivery van behind him was not impressed and was encouraging him to move along in his own indomitable fashion. A blast from his horn. The customer eventually exited the taxi, glared at the van and disappeared into what looked like a café.

My focus now turned to the flat. There was a light blue sofa, which I had taken to be my home for the interim period. Directly in front was a low, black television cabinet with a Hitachi sitting on top. Behind the sofa was a black vinyl table with four similarly styled chairs, each with a bright red fitted cushion. The kitchen was located at the back of the apartment. It was basic, with a series of counters forming a J-shape. It consisted of a twin electric hob, a microwave oven and a small standalone oven between the two. There was a normal-sized fridge/freezer combo, Hitachi again, to the right as I was looking at it. The door to the toilet was located next to the fridge. I saw a note held in place by a fridge magnet, my name written in black marker pen.

Dave,

Hope I didn't disturb you. Help yourself to whatever you find in the fridge, and I'll see you this evening after work. On the table is the classified section of the South China Morning Post. This has a construction focus on Wednesday's so hopefully it will give you a flavour of possibilities available. We'll go to a restaurant, and I'll introduce you to some of my friends this evening. I'll be back around 6:30 or 7 latest.

Have a good day recovering.

Cheers.

Mark

I opened the fridge door and pulled out the bread and butter. I popped a couple of slices in the toaster and flicked the television on. BBC news poured out of the speakers as I spread butter on my toast, took a few bites and then realized how much my hunger had manifested itself as I threw some more bread into the toaster.

Once the dishes were washed and dried, I flipped through pages of classified ads. I circled a few that were either appealing or that I thought I could match in terms of requirements. I then went back through and crossed quite a few out that just sounded dodgy in terms of company names. I for one did not wish to work for Wong Kee Construction. Many had a number to call or a fax number to send through my résumé. I had neither, so I would have to talk to Mark as to the best route to make contact. In the meantime I decided to head out onto the street in search for a coffee shop. My caffeine levels needed some serious tender loving care, and the Nescafe coffee granules just didn't do it for me.

Staunton Street is a meandering road that runs east to west in the Central District of Hong Kong Island. I took a right as I exited the building and saw a covered footway leading north towards the

harbour. As the land descended, the walkway became elevated. It twisted and turned passing over Hollywood Road, Lyndhurst Terrace, Wellington Street, Stanley Street and eventually Queens Road.

When I set out on my journey from England to Hong Kong I had very little idea of what I was going to expect. As I walked on, my ears were assailed by continuous and incessant noise. The crowded streets thronged with people, car horns blaring with maddening persistence, violently disturbing the environment. People were shouting and whistling. All the shop windows sold European-style clothing. They didn't dress like Dr Fu Manchu. The men mostly wore shabby trousers and white vests pulled up above their bellies. I felt strangely lost, far from home and confused by the scene around me.

To my right was a shopping centre, so I decided to enter and found heaven that was called Starbucks. "A large Americano, please." I eagerly placed my order. I reckoned the sharp, bitter jolt of caffeine was just the kick I needed to get through the rest of the day. "That's thirty Hong Kong dollars, please," the Asian lady behind the counter said as she reached her hand out to receive the money. I was unable to determine whether that was expensive or not as I handed over my fifty Hong Kong dollar note. "Grande Americano" was the call as the lady handed me back my change. "You'll pick up your coffee over there," she pointed to the end of the counter. "Next!" and I went off to wait for my coffee as my mind still tried to work out exchange rates. After a short while, I realized this was futile, as I was spending money in this country, not the UK. I took the decision to simply pay whatever the price was and forget about exchange rates. My coffee arrived; I picked a seat and took time to people watch. I drank my coffee and felt its restorative powers take effect.

I headed back to the flat and took a short nap. Shortly after waking I heard the key in the door as Mark came back from work. "Hey there, how's it been?" he asked cheerily.

"Not too bad; needed quite a bit of coffee to get going. Not sure where my body is in terms of time, but my eyes are open, so I must be awake," I answered and laughed.

"Just as well, we are heading straight out. Let's go," he said, and I followed him out the door.

My first culinary visit, outside of Starbucks, was to a Mongolian restaurant called Nomads. This was located on the Kowloon Peninsula in an area called Tsim Sha Tsui. Mark and I took the mass transit railway, or the MTR, and then a short walk from the station. I should point out that the trains would generally be overcrowded with people packed in like sardines. It should have been called the Movement Totally Restricted system.

The background noise along Nathan Road was deafening. Cars and buses rumbled over the tarmacked road; horns honked and people tried to make themselves heard above the din. We finally turned down Kimberly Road, which was slightly less raucous, and about five minutes later were at the door of the restaurant. We entered, and Mark saw his friends already seated at the table. "Guys, this is Dave; Dave, this is everyone," he said as he extended his arm in their general direction.

"Hi" was the general response. Gina, John, Heinrich, Jo and Heloise all smiled back at me as I shook each of their hands. I took my seat between Heloise and Heinrich as I took in the restaurant. The tables were of a varnished dark wood. The chairs had an animal skin cover, matching those skins that adorned the walls and light shades.

"I'm starving," proclaimed Heloise. "Come on, I'll show you what to do," and we both headed to the extensive food area. There were pots and bowls set out on countertops. Above were panes of glass with a written description of each bowl, whether it

was meat, vegetable or some exotic sauce. The selection was impressive. "OK, grab a bowl and follow me," announced Heloise, her South African accent hanging in my ears as she pushed a bowl into my hand. Heloise, her espresso-coloured hair falling just above her shoulders, her eyes seemingly crafted from the purest jade. She was modest, charming and could articulate easily. She also possessed a dry, quirky sense of humour. It must have been what attracted me to her. I obediently accepted the bowl and followed, catching glimpses of her slim, tight bottom as her top swayed with the rhythm of her body.

"It's quite simple, really," explained Heloise. "You put in whatever vegetables, meats or seafood you want, add the sauce and hand to the cook at the end. All very playful, I find." There was a glint in her eyes as she started to place carrots and white onions into her bowl. Heloise continued to meander down the counter, studying the variety on offer before she added to her bowl. I followed, using the tongs to fill my bowl, and took several scoops of the ginger and black bean sauces at the end. I handed my bowl to the cook and received a number, which I was to place next to me on the table. Heloise politely waited for me, and we headed back to the table.

By the time we returned, the beers had already been ordered, our glasses were full and the discussion was animated. The group, I discovered, worked in diverse industries. "I tell you, you need to move jobs, John. Hong Kong is like one big piñata; all you need to do is to know where to hit, and you will receive the sweetest reward," encouraged Mark.

"I know that, but I am happy where I am at the moment. Yes, I complain, but better the devil you know, as I always say," returned John. He was slim and tall. He had recently had his long, dark hair cut to look like James Bond. He told me later he had taken in a photo of Pierce Brosnan to show the barber. However, unlike Bond, he preferred cargo pants and T-shirts; plus his preferred

drink was a pint of lager. However, he never varied his routine. Routine was important to him. He told me once, “Without routine you have chaos, and I hate chaos as much as bats hate the sun.”

“Well, as far as I am concerned, ninety-nine per cent of the expats here are here for one thing and one thing only—money,” proclaimed Gina. Gina had a straight nose, and on either side were large brown eyes, accentuated further by her pale skin. A sharp, pointed chin gave her an air of superiority. Gina was bold and confident. Her red hair, full and wavy, sparkled in the lights of the restaurant. As she was nearly six foot in flat shoes, I felt dwarfed. “Most of them won’t even admit to that and will simply continue to lie to themselves and live a life of pretence. Why on earth can they not simply say ‘I’m here for the money, and as soon as the work is finished, I’ll leave’? It’s really pathetic.”

I wondered if that was why Gina was here, to boost her bank balance and then disappear once the Colony was handed back to China. Having just met her, I wasn’t about to aggravate her. However, Heloise was more than happy to explore that avenue. “So this is why you’re here, Gina?”

There was an obvious internal reaction that spilled into her cheeks as a reddish hue grew. “Well, I wouldn’t say that; after all, I am not that well paid.” Gina’s defence fell flat on most of her friends around the table. The conversation continued to go to and fro: those who supported the “grab all you can” mentality and those who saw it more as a good career move.

“Well, experience is my main driver, money second,” I declared; however, not having a job yet, I wasn’t sure my view counted.

“Under British rule Hong Kong has gone from a fishing village to a world-class economic city. The financial sector of Asia is based here. Major corporations have set up their offices in the ‘Gateway to China.’ All under the protection of the British. However, that is about to change in the next three years,” Jo

concluded. She was a slender girl with an agreeable figure, although her facial features were somewhat plain. She worked in the financial sector, and it seemed that she feared most for her job. She continued, "The handover is coming, and I'm not only talking about Hong Kong being handed over from Britain to China, but the handover of money to anyone willing to work in this crazy place."

Gina jumped in "But you have the most to lose, Jo. Look at who you work for."

An agitated Jo responded briskly, "You're right, I do. After all, they built their foundations on the opium trade. I am sure as soon as China takes over, it will want to make sure this company cannot trade here anymore and will try its best to strike all records from the history books. We all know they are pretty good at twisting the truth. Look at you guys, engineers and architects. And you, Gina, a lawyer. This is where opportunity is knocking, and by God, it is knocking loud and clear! I, for one, will grasp it with both hands," she concluded.

"I wholeheartedly agree," said Mark. "Who knows what the next three, four or five years will bring, so I'm going to take advantage now. Yes, it sounds materialistic, but unfortunately I can't buy my house back in the UK with a load of 'thank you' letters."

"Well, one thing is for sure, you Brits have certainly managed to make a pretty decent country out of a drugs den," stated Heloise, in reference to the Opium Wars, which originally gifted the Colony to the UK.

"You're right," responded Jo. "But Maggie, in her wisdom, decided to hand it all back. Hong Kong belongs to the UK, for God's sake. Fine, hand back the New Territories, by all means. I mean the people who live there are pretty much Mainland Chinese anyway, so who would miss them? Let's keep the island."

"And how on earth would you govern half a country?" asked Mark.

“We will never learn, always thinking we can rule. It is one country and needs one system. Maggie messed up; she’s handed the lot back; we’ve got to accept it and move on. There is plenty to keep us going here. Failing that we’ll move to Bath and open up a custard pie shop!” said John.

“Ha, Fat Pang. Well, Chris succeeded where many failed. He got the people on his side. Not bad for someone who lost his seat in the General Election,” added Mark.

“So do you like to travel?” asked Heinrich. His South African made “travel” sound harsh.

“Yes, I do. I’ve done a bit around Europe and some over in the USA. Looking forward to exploring a bit of Asia now,” I responded happily.

“The USA, where did you go? I spent some time in Florida doing a bit of American football during a summer. Was great fun, excellent workout for rugby,” he said and laughed.

“Oh, I worked in the Rockies for a few months before travelling for another month. So you play rugby?” I asked.

“Yeah, there’s a new team over in Aberdeen. The female team has managed to get sponsorship from Richard Branson, came over to see the team, too. You throw a ball around from time to time, do ya?”

“I’ve been known to now and then. When you do you train?” I probed excitedly. The thought of having a run-around sounded great. “We practice every Tuesdays and Thursdays with games on Saturday afternoon. Why not come down next Tuesday and do some training?” Heinrich suggested.

“I certainly will. How do I get there?”

“Mark, you going to training on Tuesday?” Heinrich barked.

“Yeah, I’ll be over. I’ll bring a few beers for refreshments.” Mark laughed.

“Dave’s interested in coming over. More the merrier. Can you make sure he gets there?” Heinrich requested.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Great, I look forward to it.” I nodded agreeably.

“So when did you arrive?” Heloise asked.

“Oh, sometime in the early hours of this morning, so if I fall asleep in my bowl, please nudge me,” I answered.

“Oh, I hope I’m not that much of a boring companion,” she jested with me.

“Not at all,” I replied, a slight panic entering my voice as she smiled.

“Did you come with British Airways?” she enquired.

“No, unfortunately, I came via Air India.” Her eyes widened in surprise. “Yes, I know, I’m a fool. I had a four-hour stopover in Mumbai and a one-hour stopover in New Delhi. Still trying to work out which was worse.” I summarized my trip.

“Why is that?” Heloise probed.

“Well, in Mumbai, I walked to a café to get some food and two cockroaches flew out.”

“Oh yuk, that’s disgusting,” she exclaimed, laughing.

“And then in New Delhi we sat on the tarmac for an hour with the doors open while waiting for the other passengers. It was in the forties, I guess.”

“I imagine that was not the most comfortable wait you’ve ever had.” She confirmed my thoughts perfectly.

“So what do you do?” I enquired.

“Ah, that I will have to explain over another dinner sometime, when you are less jetlagged. But let’s just say, for ease, I work in an off license. Maybe once you get settled, find a job, and if you are still around in a week or so, we could meet up?”

I was taken aback but at the same time amazed that Heloise would suggest meeting me. “Well, I will redouble my efforts to find work,” I responded, which was met by a satisfied smile.

We all took the MTR together back to Central. When we arrived at the platform, Heloise pointed to one side. "I go that way, I guess you go the other way?" pointing to the side for Sheung Wan.

"Yes, unfortunately we are going in opposite directions for the moment." No doubt fuelled by a few pints, I had built up enough courage, and while I searched for the correct words, eventually a sentence came out of my mouth. "I am sure you will be busy; however, if you are free, it would be really great if we could meet up for dinner one evening."

She started, "Oh, I am really sorry, Dave; I have appointments this week—work, of all things. I am free at the weekend, but if you are tied up job hunting, then we can rain check until a better time." She had a perfect smile that radiated from her lips.

"I am free to meet you whenever. How about next Saturday? I'll find a place and let you know. Is there a number I can get you on?"

I asked. She regarded at me for a second before she replied, "Women don't like too many questions in one sentence. But of course there are exceptions. The answer is, of course, yes. Here's my business card; give me a call. I look forward to getting to know more about Dave Mears. See you next Saturday. Remember to call me." She shook a finger at me like a teacher would to a naughty student.

"How could I forget?" was my casual, automatic response. Her train arrived, and she boarded. As the doors closed and the train departed, she looked back out through the window, gave me a warm smile and waved goodbye.

When I got back to Mark's, I still had Heloise in my mind. Her words still resonated in my ears: "Remember to call me," and that whimsical, playful smile was an image imprinted in my mind. That smile I would come to know, love and adore. She would be a

person for whom I held so much chemistry, emotion and passion. We had only just met, but it was as if I had known her intimately for years. I made the promise that I would indeed make that call.