

HONG KONG STORY

1

‘Hello, this is Peter Ng. I hope I’m not disturbing you?’

‘No, you’re not.’

‘Then come to my office for a moment please.’

Rex stood up and glanced at his team of three. Rose, his Assistant Manager, was reading a company email and drinking her morning cup of green tea, May was running a warrant programme while concurrently tapping away at her mobile phone anchored by its recharging cable to the wall and Lottie was scrutinising internet pages for a new bedside table, so two out of three working, not bad for 9am. A few steps over the office carpet, a brief look at himself in the reflective glass partition of the Risk Department—he was twenty-seven, wore his black hair long and touched with oil, a military tonsure at the sides, a style he had not changed in ten years (not that there was much a Chinese guy could or would do with his hair)—and he was at his manager’s door, knocking. Peter Ng, Head of Operations, was sitting at his desk and motioned Rex inside towards a chair, not breaking from the reading he was doing, standard procedure before his subordinates, busy man that he was, pursued by important matters.

Rex sat and waited for his boss’s attention. Ng was a small tidy man in his fifties, walnut skinned, with a cheerful even boyish demeanour when he really smiled. He had on his desk a thick blotter in a crocodile skin surround with matching pens in fluted holders. Beside the fiddle-leafed fig in the corner stood rarely used golf clubs and a perpetual overnight bag. ‘If I’m sacked I’m ready to go—always.’ Ng had confided this to Rex, as he had to many of

his subordinates at significant moments, providing for them a charming moment of self-deprecation, a moment of proof that he was just an ordinary guy, a father-figure if they liked, but one of them all the same.

This twenty-ninth floor corner office, walled by glass, showed a hazy day outside. There were the footings of Admiralty down below, Victoria Harbour out away a bit and Kowloon at a peaceful distance, the whole thing a landscape fit for a mountain top. Rex twitched to think that this privileged view, befitting the premises of an International Bank, was partly in the keeping of a man like Peter Ng. As he waited, Rex's eye was caught by movement in the park below, where a cross between a tropical garden and a Victorian shrubbery was being ripped up to make way for a subway blow-hole. This whole abstraction, the Hong Kong Chinese Dream, how could so worthless a man as Ng have so big a share of it?

Ng was bursting to tell Rex something and soon gave up his game. 'Leon has agreed to wait until next year to be promoted,' he announced.

A why was needed and Rex dutifully provided it.

'It's better so. I told him,' Ng went on happily. ' " Leon, we already know that this year pay is frozen across the bank, so why get yourself promoted? It's better you wait until next year when you can get a pay rise".'

Poor Leon. He was one of the hard-working sweats of Ng's department, who had deserved promotion years ago but who had been fobbed off by excuses. Why would Ng never willingly promote Leon? Because Leon was able and clever and Ng could not let other people shine. If he ran a meritocracy he would soon be in very serious difficulty over his own position. Leon must have listened to Ng's latest tosh and again failed to mount a successful counter-argument. But no one in the department had the power to penetrate the bullshit that Ng put out, or if they did, Ng had already got rid of them. Leon must now be weighing his options, between resigning or abandoning all hope of career progress.

‘If you promoted him now couldn’t he expect his pay to be made up to Assistant Vice President level next year?’ Rex said.

‘But why should he take the extra responsibility in the meantime?’ replied Ng. This was obviously his argument to Leon too. ‘He is happy with what I told him. It’s better for him to wait.’

Rex said nothing more. Ng watched him then dismissed the topic with a wave of the hand. ‘Boyce has told me to start more cross-training,’ he said. He put his hands behind his head and swung back in his chair. ‘I have to make sure everybody is cross-trained for the company’s safety.’

‘OK,’ said Rex.

‘Can you give me the names of two people in your team whose jobs someone else can learn. Then I will notify you who will replace – I mean learn from – them.’

‘Yes, I can do that.’

‘Good. That’s all.’

Rex quit the office and went back to his desk. Cross-training. What a load of baloney that was too.

A month earlier Chief Tang, Rex’s mentor for some years, had hosted a bridge-building lunch at the Marriott Hotel between Rex and Ng. It was a friendly occasion. The food and service was good and the buffet restaurant had the expansiveness of a cathedral, with much the same views of Admiralty enjoyed in the office. The idea was that in these surroundings a distillation of the concerns Rex had expressed to Chief Tang in private about Ng’s management style could be beneficially dovetailed with soufflés and French cheeses.

The difference between Chief Tang and Ng was this: Chief Tang was an upright man, Ng was a crook.

As well as upright Chief Tang was an articulate soft-skilled workaholic of endless patience and humour, truly a father of the office, a friend to all his staff. He was courteous and he was humble and he had helped build an affiliate in Hong Kong which had made one hundred million US dollars in its best year. When later the affiliate had ailed and been acquired by a Japanese bank set on

rapid expansion in Hong Kong, Chief Tang had worked to make the best of it for all. For Rex he was the true image of a patriarchal manager of the classical Chinese mould, parsimonious with company money, uncomfortable with anything but dedication and hard-work amongst the staff, but a man of real warmth.

On Rex's many visits to blow off steam in Chief Tang's office, Rex had told him that management had seemed all so easy with Rundleson, his previous boss, an Australian do-er and problem solver, yet under Ng he couldn't reproduce it. Instead he was aware of being progressively sucked in by the Ng quagmire. He lacked the push to contend with Ng point by point without losing his temper. Apathy and laziness offered a way out and he was taking it. Ng was making him a coaster.

Chief Tang said, don't show irritation. Let your boss keep his face. Go round him if you can't achieve things with his participation.

Rex said the trouble was Ng's ears were not open to subordinates. When you spoke to Ng his face glazed over. After you had stopped talking he said what he was going to say all along.

Chief Tang liked Rex. It all sounded kindergarten stuff but he arranged the lunch.

The lunch was not a success. Though equals in the company hierarchy it was Ng who belonged to the purchasing Japanese Bank and Chief Tang to the embarrassed corporation submitting to a new master, and Ng knew it. With the merger, rivalries like this were being played out across the organisation. The Japanese bank, goliathan at home, had been a small branch here flat-lining for forty years, run like a mortuary, while Chief Tang's house possessed smart young people moving fast in their careers through innovation and hard work. A tricky fusion which saw hand to hand fighting department by department, with the slave sometimes ousting the master – a reverse merger those at the affiliate called it optimistically.

If Ng had been a different sort of man he would have taken Chief Tang's intervention in good part. As it was his ego was

offended. He was a crook and he had nothing to say to Chief Tang, simply wanting his redundancy to occur sooner rather than later. The lunch did not dent Ng's confidence either. Their mutual boss was Boyce, COO, and not only did Boyce belong to the purchasing Japanese bank too but he was known to keep a protective arm around Rex and his department, probably because once upon a time Boyce had been a settlements clerk himself.

Over starters Chief Tang sung the praises of Rex's little team, which had arrived in Ng's domain only three months earlier. Over the main course Ng promised to leave it alone. But over dessert Chief Tang and Rex lost their appetite, seeing that Ng didn't mean it. Given time and a clear run Ng would break up Rex's team, sideline Rex to the point where his position became untenable and no doubt Chief Tang would be headed for the door by then too.

2

‘You looked tired. Not burnt out I hope?’

Rachel from Human Resources sat in front of Rex at a small table in a small meeting room. He wondered if she had put on a dab of perfume before coming. This was periodic chat, done on a semi-annual schedule, that everyone was supposed to have with their HR person. Unexpectedly, Rachel had just become Rex's HR person, in this company constantly reorganising itself. And they had known each other at school.

‘We always noticed you were a ball of energy working for Rundleson. And your hair got longer and longer.’

His office nickname was practically in the air, Nuts, because, for a Chinese drinking with foreigners, peanuts were a must.

‘Oh well, you know. . . no one's busy anymore.’

‘Try working in HR.’

Rex saw the point. ‘Yes, it must take a lot of work making such numbers redundant.’

Rachel laughed. She always laughed extravagantly when she could.

She had never been tall and her face was round and compact. He liked the way she had her hair now, the executive cut, shortish and tinted; her hands were beautifully manicured and she wore a tailored two-piece suit. This is what a fellow pupil at High School could become, ten years on. Office talk suggested she wasn't involved with anyone. He was supposed to be, and everyone at the office presumably knew it, a girl whose parents lived on one of the outlying islands. She played piano very well, was an avid love maker and had superb breasts, which she thrust forward as she rode him, in an all but smothering embrace. Extricating himself from this volatile girl had been difficult. Some years ago she'd run away from home—all of five kilometres on the ferry from Cheung Chau—and she was now a social worker with a string of clients from the social housing projects, victims of domestic abuse. She'd stormed him when they met and, according to the scale of misery and sharp mental pain in which she and her clients existed, there was nothing wrong with their relationship. But he was determined not to marry her. They had a perpetual argument about condoms, which he insisted on using though she maintained she was on the pill. He did not trust her. Now he wanted Rachel to know that he was single. He hoped she was somehow able to guess.

'How are your parents,' Rex asked. 'Not moved away have they?'

'No, same old place. They're fine.'

They had both been brought up on the eastern end of Hong Kong, a place of wide carriageways for traffic and raised walkways for pedestrians, connecting the malls to the housing projects. The area had the prestige of being on the island not in Kowloon or the New Territories. Summers were sweltering and there was nothing to do. You could not get near the water for commercial jetties, warehouses and commercial shipping yards. Back then Rachel's father was a stevedore, her mother in some administrative job at the hospital. Today Chai Wan hadn't changed much. The streets of

warehouses close to the waterfront were the same, commercial brownstones serving a workforce of tired, bent-limbed locals who ate at filthy cafes. Yet art studios and garages for high-end sports cars had begun to steal in.

‘They want to move in with Aunt Wo in Vancouver,’ said Rachel. ‘And Aunt Wo says the winters in Canada are too cold and she wants to move back to Hong Kong, so I say they should just swap and see how they like it.’

‘My parents’ latest fetish is Australia,’ said Rex. ‘You’d think they were there. They have it all on the internet, the weather in downtown Sydney, the surf level on Bondi Beach. They don’t care what’s happening outside their own window anymore.’

‘Hey, Haig retired.’

‘Impossible.’

This was their English teacher, a spinster from the Scottish Highlands, whose pupils, as they moved through the High School, came on in their English and on in their Scottish accents equally. After matriculation different vocations, engineering and biology, had separated Rex and Rachel, yet, years on, both abandoned their professions for banking. And the once familiar girl next-door in braids, with whom he’d had his first sweet kiss, his first young love affair, was now this cosmopolitan executive before him.

‘Ock, how’s your wee flat there?’ Rex said, trying to sound like Miss Haig.

‘Up up up, yours too—must be.’ Rachel put her hands together. ‘My Dear Reverend Feng Shui Master, thank you for your wise council and investment advice.’

Rex nodded. But his own apartment, nicely in profit though it was, was so lonely nowadays. He even missed the madcap piano player and had to fight himself not to ring her. How nice it would be to have Rachel twittering away there like a songbird in a cage. It was time to get married and wouldn’t Rachel make a good wife? A sudden vision came to him. What if they pooled their money and bought a high-floor apartment with a sea view? He would sit in the living room on Saturday afternoons in his sweatpants playing

computer games and she would bustle around as she liked. What satisfaction he would take from possession of her company on Saturday afternoons, possession of her. Perhaps then he would be ready to surrender his freedom and take on the shackles of marriage, the lock-step of Chinese family life determined by senior relatives. Yes, but not without an up-front payment, lazy afternoons in sweatpants playing video games, paid in full. With his own career liable to blow up any minute, the thought of a steadying marriage partnership had never seemed a better idea.

He knew Rachel wanted to ask him how he was getting on with Ng. HR knew everything of course. Probably she wanted to help. But he felt he'd rather avoid the subject. To put her off he asked what the management style was supposed to be now, in a Japanese company operating in Hong Kong with half its staff Chinese a quarter Western.

Rachel said she had no idea. No one had. 'Anyone who's Japanese is managed from Tokyo, even if they have a local manager, I know that. The rest of us are managed locally even if we have a Tokyo reporting line.'

Since the acquisition she had grown to enjoy the madness of the Japanese, which was not very different from the madness of the Chinese. It was always going to seem crazy to someone.

'Who's no trouble?' said Rex.

'The Indians. The least paid too.'

'Well, call me Indian then. That's me at work now.'

'What about that certain person?' said Rachel.

'You're not going to talk Jesus to me are you?'

'No, we don't need to talk Jesus. But come to lunch. We're all going to try Kazakhstani horse meat.'

Hong Kong lunches were sit-down restaurant affairs and with five a week everyone needed more than one lunch group. This one comprised Tina and Betty in Administration, unmarried companionable girls, Eddie, a married guy from Ng's department and Rachel. Along with their guest Rex they mustered at noon in

the office lobby, made their way through the mall and walked out to the thoroughfare of civic disobedience and revolt that was Queensway.

It had been unbelievable, turning up to work one Monday morning to find the roads closed. They had seen it on television, the weekend of protest gatherings as Occupy Central, spoken about for a year, suddenly kicked off and quickly led to a tear-gas attack by the police. But to see with their own eyes how Admiralty had become a place like Cairo with its late insurrections or like a border in the Middle East with its uneasy stand-offs – they could only gasp. How could this gloriously commercial district pull such a surprise?

Yes, that Admiralty could be under the control of students seemed beyond belief but so it was and so it had stayed. Now, a month on, Queensway had become a silent place. The tops of the tram lines were losing their shine. Buses and taxis were forgotten and people used the roads for walking. In the middle of the six lane highway the Jersey barrier had been pulled aside so people could cross what was now an eerie vacuum in a corridor of tall buildings. Elsewhere, Mills barriers, seized in the first day and turned back against the police, were now barricades supplemented by shopping trolleys and umbrellas, all bound up with plastic ties and rope. Here stood a handful of protesters, there a clutch of policeman and tourists took snapshots. Nothing was expected to be resolved for some time to come. The lunch group crossed quickly under the face of the hot sun and went down into the subway station.

Some of the lunch group had shared their views, others' were understood without a declaration. Rachel was aligned to the bosses. She had a good heart but she was on the make and the others respected that. China was the strongest party and Rachel's thoughts must turn upon that fact and upon the protestors' certain ultimate defeat.

Bettie in administration was too shy to give her thoughts. She had a large plain face, an ordinary physique and dressed herself for the office without glamour. The health of her parents was not good

and she was a trusting, obedient gentle daughter to them. They all lived in Social Housing in the New Territories where the developers idea of a balcony was an eagle's perch for the AC boxes. The family would never have a garden, only indoor plants, they'd never have a pet beyond a gerbil or songbird, they'd never own their own apartment or have enough space to sleep in separate bedrooms. Because parts of Hong Kong were blocked by the protestors her journey into work was ten minutes longer now but she did not mind. Her heart was with them all the way. When one of her uncles or cousins spoke inflamed words she looked up from her housework and inwardly cheered. The gap between rich and poor in Hong Kong was painful and hearing it said in this autumn of active protest sent thrills through her body.

Tina, her workmate in Administration, was the bulldog type. Her premise was that sooner or later everything turned to shit. She was taller and stronger than Bettie and wore more colourful clothes. The reason neither of them had married yet, she said, was because selfish men went to find wives on the mainland. As for mainlanders, they were coming into Hong Kong in their droves, their children were taking an increasing proportion of the primary school places and ordinary Hong Kongers were being squeezed out. Independence from China was what she dreamily hoped for. As the lunch group bunched up inside the carriage of the subway train, she did most of the talking. There had been 2am scuffles in Mongkok over the weekend, another site of the occupation, and she just hoped some punches had gone home. The trouble was rents were high, salaries low and apart from the students few people could afford to protest.

Rex didn't have to give an opinion. Looking across at Rachel he remarked that China's squeeze on Hong Kong was exactly the same as the squeeze that Ng was placing on his team. 'Then you should barricade Ng's office,' said Tina cheekily and the others laughed.

Eddie, the married man, spoke up, saying the students civil disobedience shouldn't be criticised for undermining the rule of

law. That was phony as, if anything, in putting a hand up to China the students were asserting the rule of law that Hong Kong enjoyed and China unfortunately did not. Tina agreed. ‘Your arguments may do for mainlanders, Mr C Y Leung, farmers in China who have never heard of a free press and don’t know what human rights are. Here we do.’ And Bettie coloured.

After that Eddie fell back into his usual attentive silence. He was one of Ng’s drones and you only had to look at him to see he had long ago spent whatever up-front payment for marriage had come his way; his afternoons of computer gaming time in sweatpants were well over. He was locked into the serious business of raising a family with his wife and clearly not a penny was wasted on his own appearance.

The train pulled in and five hundred people formed an orderly crush making up to the surface.

At the yakitori restaurant they were served their Kazakhstani horse meat on barbeque forks, Kobe beef too, gizzard of duck and tongue of chicken, all consumed with typical Hong Kong gusto and interest, leaving the table reasonably satisfied and Rachel said she would buy a full-sized Black Forest gateaux for tea so they wouldn’t go hungry later. Of course they were all trim in figure, representatives of the compact Asian type with which the global work-force was being progressively retooled.

Conversation at table followed Betty and Tina’s account of their Bangkok holiday, taken with fellow unattached female workers in Administration a week earlier. Well, the holiday had been great, said Tina. Their online booked service apartment had turned out to be clean and modern, if not as near to the city centre as they had been led to believe. They had liked the welcome fruit basket left on the table with the spare keys, falling over it like locusts. There was a plasma television in the living room and everybody had their own bedroom. Thai beds were big, so very big. On beholding their bedrooms the holiday really began and everybody had gone round inspecting each others’ with great glee.

In the daytime they went to the market, took massages and ate noodle soup but at night somehow no one could sleep.

‘Bangkok has all sorts of strange noises at night,’ said Tina.

‘I couldn’t get used to not hearing my grandmother moaning right next to me,’ said Bettie.

The first declaration that the serviced-apartment was haunted came from their friend Carol at breakfast on the second day. There had been unaccountable shadows playing on the wall, she said; when she opened her eyes the full expanse of the room simply terrified her. The others agreed the apartment felt strange after dark. They went out on their next sortie. The taxi driver they hailed in the street took them shopping and they never thought it would end. It felt silly that one man could drive them around like chickens from one place to another. They had only wanted to go to the Royal Palace. After markets and gold shops in Surawong they were finally free again. More night markets and massages followed. The oil massages were funny. Thai ladies were so friendly and their hands strong. It warmed the heart to be touched so firmly. But the apartment was definitely haunted and that night Bettie and Tina bunked up together, as did the three other girls and they were all exhausted and slept well.

‘Next time we’ll book a smaller apartment,’ said Tina as everyone rose from lunch. ‘We don’t need a room each. Those Thai beds are big enough for four.’

Now everyone wanted to make the same joke about how cheap the repeat holiday could be made next time.

‘None of us could bring ourselves to give the massage ladies tips,’ Bettie admitted to Rex. ‘I still wonder if we should have.’

‘Indians barter and Chinese don’t tip, those are world facts. Just remember you’re Chinese, dear,’ said Tina.

In the afternoon Rex had to attend a meeting convened weekly to discuss progress on the bank’s major inter-regional project, developing the infrastructure to allow offices outside Japan to book deals in the name of the parent bank, rather than the local affiliate.

Hong Kong and London, whose balance sheets stood to benefit most from this project, were doing the lion's share of the set-up work. Tokyo, having earlier given the go-ahead, had been dragging its heels for some weeks.

Participants arrived in dribs and drabs and took chairs around the long maplewood table. On one wall was a large television and someone was fiddling at a side-table of controls to bring the video links with Tokyo and London alive. Tokyo came into picture, a white boxy room containing twenty or so people dressed identically in white shirts and black pants with security passes around their necks on vermilion ribbons. At the central table sat five managers in somnolent postures, the rest were eager on ladder chairs notepads at hand. London flickered to life, a nineteenth century day-room complete with high ceiling, moulded cornices and panelled walls, where three IT people, who had been up all night writing the new programming, sat looking fretfully towards the high-placed camera. Puffings and tappings on the speaker-phone indicated the presence of two Singapore participants, who had dialled in and whose every breath was being unwittingly amplified until someone remembered to push the mute button.

The two executive managers of the project, one in Hong Kong one in Tokyo, began to exchange pleasantries about the weather. Somebody in London interjected a comment that it was very cold there which chimed satisfactorily with Asian expectations. The project managers were the glory boys of these project meetings. As a species they had conned the entire business world into categorising work as either BAU – Business As Usual, a pejorative term which made no bones about tagging back-office and administrative jobs as essentially brainless – or non-BAU. In the latter case, to a trumpet call and drum roll, a project manager was called for. This was the orthodoxy. But, despite the supposedly cloddish nature of BAU people, today most of the participants in the meeting were just that, Rex one of them. As the agenda got started Rex could feel himself sinking into the same hour of

paralysis that had been served up last week. Yet twenty minutes in, a moment of excitement came along.

From the very first agenda point the pattern the meeting would take was apparent. Hong Kong and London reported that work targeted for the week had been completed while Tokyo gave only vague updates unclear on actual achievement. So it went on and the voice of the Hong Kong project leader became strained. Yet he proceeded from point to point steadfastly, recording answers without complaint, leaving others around the Hong Kong table to stir and itch. So the meeting appeared fated to conclude until Duncan, a BAU manager from the IT department spoke up. Rex drank in the same crowd as Duncan. He was tall, slim and fresh-faced by way of metro-man's cosmetic conditioners and toners. Now Duncan stood up. His voice was that of a cultured gay man of English working-class roots, but he spoke firmly. He addressed Japan alone, looking carefully at the picture as if to rouse one of those elderly samurais slouched at the table from their post-sushi nap.

'Look guys, we're going through the motions here so can we just stop for a moment? We've all delivered big projects before so we all know the score. Can we hear from you, Tokyo? Does the August deadline still hold? Because if it doesn't I know lots of people who could quite happily go and do something else.'

The men in Tokyo showed no reaction. Then a weary slightly needled voice began to speak. 'Tokyo is very busy at the moment. We are involved in the Murex Team 3 project which takes a lot of time, and there are many new modifications the Tokyo Stock Exchange requires. I am sorry. We will try our best.'

'That's still not clear, to me,' Duncan came back, courteous but unafraid to show feeling. 'Abe-san?' Now he named the Tokyo Chief directly. 'I've got a team working on this project. Shall I tell them to do something else?'

Slim, bespectacled, Abe-san, chief Samurai, raised his head from the table. The picture resolution was not strong enough to be sure of his facial expression. 'You're right, Duncan, my friend, the

project must be completed by the deadline. Tokyo will complete their work on time.'

'Thank you for clarifying that,' said Duncan.

'No, thank you, Duncan,' said Abe-san, almost certainly smiling.

The re-endorsement of the project by the Tokyo chief allowed the meeting to continue in a more forthcoming atmosphere. Those around the desk in Hong Kong were happy in the knowledge that on the Tokyo end, come hell or high-water, everything would now be done, given the dedicated nature of the Japanese salary man. Rex wondered if Duncan had once shared a karaoke night with some of the people in Tokyo or with Abe-san himself. If so the friendships made singing Hotel California and Country Road and drinking Asahi beer had paid off.

Late in the agenda an Operations matter came before the table and Ng spoke up. Sitting on another corner to Rex he looked like a little brown frog. The question was whether certain new internal derivative transactions, which would have to be booked from completion date onwards, could be better confirmed on an electronic platform or by paper. Ng opined that the Markitwire platform was preferable for being cheaper. It was an opinion that surprised no one around the table, but it was not one that Ng was specially qualified to make. Rex was. In earlier days Rundleson had thrown such questions over to Rex in such circumstances. Ng didn't now because his only petty thought was showing the table that he was the boss, even at the cost of providing participants with dubious information.

As the meeting broke up the project management people flocked together at the door chatting happily, like kids let into the playground after school. The BAU managers all disappeared, walking with set shoulders through the open-plan office towards their departments, a swarm of new tasks besetting their minds. At the close of these meetings Rex always felt himself crawling out of his skin, conscious of lost time.

The three girls had their heads down, having received instructions from the Warrants Trading Desk downstairs to launch twenty new warrants. It was the team's job to submit the launch announcement to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange that evening, and then to put the host of documentation in place which created the tradeable instrument. As Rex joined in they split into two teams and worked solidly for three hours. Lights went off on different parts of the floor as other teams wrapped up. At eight o'clock Rex turned to his emails. The lunch group had taken cake at five o'clock, the Black Forest Gateau, and Rachel had left a piece in the fridge for him wrapped in cling-film. Ng's thirty-strong cohort of labourers were still all at their desks. This could only mean they were following inefficient, slow processes blocked from improvement under Ng's initiative-embargo culture. Leaving the girls to finish up, Rex said goodnight.

In the small hours, sleeping alone in his apartment, Rex had an unpleasant dream – a nightmare. It was very short. An atmosphere of fear presided over Operations. People were queuing outside Ng's office to drink his piss. Ng himself was a large toad. The piss steamed in yellow beakers on the desk. In blind obedience Leon went in and Rex was behind him. Then Rex woke up. The dream carried into the wakeful state the disgusting taste of spoiled vegetable matter and the smell of brackish seawater. He ran to the bathroom and was sick. It was 3am.

Unable to return to sleep he stood at his bedroom window and watched the night buses passing down King's Road. A lone figure in an un-curtained apartment adjacent was watching television and drinking what looked to be whisky. Rex could see his own reflection in front of him, a young proud Chinese man with over-long hair. Every member of Operations is faced with the same decision, he thought. People can either stay or leave. If they stay they can submit freely or figure out a way of not caring about what they can't change. For Rex it was slightly different. His team had become too small to need a manager and in a hostile climate there was little to do but leave. Then he thought of Rachel and badly

wanted to do something about her. Saluting the whisky drinker opposite, he returned to bed.

3

The team worked hard the next morning making final checks to global certificates and supplemental listing documents prepared the evening before. Rex found himself glancing at his team with wistful thoughts. They had been together seven years, getting their systems hand-built to their needs – that was where geeky Rex felt he had made his mark – year on year more efficient, until their unit was one of the most capable teams in Hong Kong, a jewel in the crown of the bank if Ng had but known it. But the Japanese bank's expansion in Hong Kong had turned out to be a bubble. After the acquisition the back office teams were strengthened in anticipation of large volumes of business. Rex's team had gone briefly up to twelve. It was all profoundly mistaken top-level managerial optimism. The volumes did not materialise. New business lines simply failed. Jobs were cut as quickly as they had been created in three quick rounds of redundancies. People who had joined with promises of opportunity in a fast-growth environment were back on the job market regretting their gullibility. Rex's team resiled to its original four. As for the main market they served, Hong Kong Warrants, the bank had tumbled from second place to seventh in the league table of issuer volumes. This was the biggest warrant market in the world, serving not only financial institutions but also Hong Kong's population of students and retirees, who following the Hang Seng Index like a popular television show ready to make a punt at any time.

Rex sat down with the team at 11 for the Friday team meeting. They went into an empty boardroom and took places. He intended to give them a light ticking off. At a recent lunch hosted by Ng their conduct had been terrible. Not one of the girls had directed a single word or a single smile to Ng. Rex chastised them now. In future

could they kindly give Ng the time of day. For whether they liked it or not, Ng was Head of Operations and their careers were in his hands. Then he broke the news about Ng's cross training plans.

Rose, his Assistant Manager, now had something to say. 'Does Ng understand that the work we do is different to the rest of Operations?' she asked. She was keenly aware of the come down in moving from Middle Office to Operations. 'Warrant and Callable Bear-Bull Contract documentation takes a long time to learn,' she went on. 'Ng thinks just a few months of cross-training will be enough, but there is more to it than regular tasks—it is not all BAU. We have to handle frequent new demands from the Hong Kong Stock Exchange; market disruptions have always to be prepared for. These things take years of experience to manage.'

Rex said she was of course right, it was by no means all BAU, but Ng had been made aware of these facts on more than one occasion.

May then spoke, saying Ng was vengeful and widely disliked in the department. She had heard time and time again at lunches that no one was happy there. 'I just don't want to talk about him or think about him,' she said with finality.

Rex now tried interesting Lottie in cross-training. 'Settlements still has a future here and you're young enough to change track,' he pointed out.

'No, thank you,' said Lottie simply, 'I'm not interested in Settlements.'

'If we were busier it might be different,' said Rex. 'But we've nothing to fight Ng with. We all have to get used to the change. Try to like Ng and for God's sake smile when you pass him in the corridor. He likes being smiled at. He remembers you smiled at him, Lottie and you're in his good books.'

'Did I? I don't remember that,' said Lottie, astonished.

'While you, May,' continued Rex, 'I'm afraid Ng says you never smile at him.'

'I just can't,' said May, with a finality equal to her first remark.

‘One little smile, a little willingness to play along. Do try it, it might save your career.’

But it was advice everybody struggled with.

At six o’clock Duncan came to fetch Rex.

‘We’re all at the Marriott. Rundleson sent me out to get you.’

Rex smelt eau de cologne, vodka and cigarettes. Duncan’s face was a smooth healthy pink. The Marriott again – well, it was next-door to the office.

‘Great intervention yesterday,’ said Rex in the lift.

‘Somebody had to speak up,’ said Duncan. ‘I’m sure you’d do the same.’

Those who had a drink after work always occupied the same spot, at the notional junction between the enormous JW Marriott lounge and the intimate Q88 nightclub, the latter with its dimmed lights, plush seating and nightly jazz singer. For them, bar stools up by the wall-windows with a ledge for their drinks, Queensway below, and the gaining lights of nocturnal Hong Kong as one drink led to the next. They found Rundleson and Boyce in place, Rundleson with a pint, Boyce with a glass of wine and an attendant ice-bucket. A selection of snacks was on the ledge in silver dishes. So far, so familiar. Chief Tang was absent, constitutionally not a drinker.

‘One more pint,’ said Rundleson to a passing waitress in the hotel’s grey two-piece livery, ‘and more peanuts.’

They had been looking out of the window and chatting. Rundleson’s first words to Rex were characteristically direct. ‘Have you told Ng to go fuck himself?’

Rundleson was an Australian, a geek, in town with his wife, whom he was re-joining later for dinner. After redundancy at the acquisition he had taken a job in London with a German bank. (That’s when Rex’s team had fallen in among the wolves). He was slim, fit, casually dressed, a man of enthusiasm and energy. A good man to work for if you could show you were not a time-waster or a bollock-talker.

‘I don’t think I can,’ said Rex.

‘Bottle him,’ said Duncan extravagantly.

‘I think I’ll just quit.’

‘Don’t,’ said Rundleson. ‘He can’t, can he Boyce?’

‘I don’t interfere in how Ng runs Operations,’ said Boyce dryly. ‘But I do manage Ng. I have him jumping through hoops sometimes. The rest is his business.’

You’re more Chinese than you look, thought Rex.

‘Don’t take any shit from him,’ Rundleson pressed Rex. ‘He doesn’t know a thing about your team and you owe him nothing.’

‘Yes, but he’s my Chinese boss.’

Rex drank his pint and felt himself withdrawing in front of these three overblown figures. With his Asian sensibility he was naturally a listener in the company of senior colleagues, at least until the third pint.

In spades, these three were friendly, articulate people with big balls. They could talk their way, sensibly, without insult or oddity, through and out of situations in the crucible of the moment. That’s what made them effective and loved managers. It wasn’t nationality – there were Japanese and Chinese who did the same – it was character.

Boyce, tall, raw faced, big-gutted, a non-stop lilting slurring talker, was telling Rundleson a story involving Hiraku-san and Oshiba-san, some tale of the week’s high-management absurdities. Rex always struggled to understand Boyce. Did all the Welsh surround their words with indecipherable sounds? A man who had allowed Ng to become a Managing Director, who wrapped a protective arm around Operations because it had incubated him twenty years ago. Twenty years on the Asian circuit: Indonesia, Singapore, Japan and now Hong Kong, to become this talker with some inner track on the Japanese mind; a man whose desk had not a single piece of paper on it, a man who looked after his own circle of cronies . . .

‘. . . he bought window boxes and geraniums today.’

Duncan was talking about his boyfriend back in London. They were opening a pub together, Duncan bankrolling it, his lover

decorating it. They were not aiming to create a gay pub, only dreaming of getting a design award for the exterior—Best Pub Window-Box, North London, 2014 or something.

Duncan gay, Boyce married to a Vietnamese, Rundleson and his girl-friend unwedded: the conservative part of Rex's heart recoiled slightly at these things. Chinese could not be such free-floaters, individual in shape. So many Westerners in Hong Kong didn't seem to belong to a place on earth anymore or a community. The Chinese were not meant to go about things that way. Patience, harmony, subsuming your own will, subsuming logic even to the group, that was the nostrum.

'So, because you're back with a Chinese manager, you're thinking like a Chinese again, are you?' said Rundleson.

'I'm a bamboo pole,' said Rex. 'The whole team have become bamboo poles, Chinese one end, Western the other, separated by watertight segments. We've got partitioned brains.'

'Forget that,' said Rundleson with impatience. 'You know what to do, I've seen you. Don't let yourself down.'

Rex said nothing. With sadness he realised that he was no longer close to Rundleson. That time was over.

'The Hong Kong Chinese say they are bananas, don't they?' said Boyce, 'Yellow on the outside, white on the inside.'

'Yes, we say so,' admitted Rex. 'Maybe we should just say we are fruit cakes.'

'Westerners must make the opposite conversion, remaining white on the outside but becoming yellow inside,' said Rundleson.

Yes, thought Rex again, that would be Boyce.

Conversation moved on, to the motionless road beyond the glass. Rundleson and his wife had ventured from their hotel earlier in the day to look at the tent village at Tamar Square, to the patchwork quilt of umbrellas filling the sky between the foot bridges, to the thousand personal notes and messages stuck to the barriers and to the sides of buildings, messages of love from idealistic young people, and to all the other art work that was coming out, by creative, industrious Hong Kong students with a

common cause. Part of the highway had become a scratch study-zone by those forced to marry exams and protest.

‘My wife said it was a bit like a music festival,’ said Rundleson, ‘only tidier.’

‘Hong Kong’s new village of lightweight mountaineering tents,’ said Duncan. ‘Think base-camp at the foot of the sheerest political cliff—mainland authoritarianism.’

‘Beijing yanks an arm, CY Leung pulls a leg, the students hang on to Hong Kong by its pretty little ball-sack,’ he added, and the other’s winced at his outness.

‘We’re an international commercial city,’ said Boyce. ‘Even the students know it. This is no theatre for conviction politics.’

‘But when you have policeman with batons, you have every minority in the world on your side,’ said Duncan.

Rex thought, what they don’t realise is the sadness that’s being felt. Hong Kongers are opposing each other on a revolutionary scale in a way that hasn’t happened before.

‘The fear is that Beijing drafts in the mainland police,’ said Rex. ‘We might be standing against Hong Kong police now, but the Hong Kong police are neighbours and friends. Probably we’re both finished.’

‘You can be proud of yourselves,’ said Duncan, ‘whatever happens.’

Rex took the chance to leave with Rundleson rather than staying to get drunk with the others and ruining Saturday with a hangover. He felt Rundleson warm to him and they said goodnight with cordial grins. Rex decided to eat in the Admiralty Centre. This also overlooked the stationary fly-over, lit yellow with high pressure sodium street lamps, the flyover pegged out with tents, people pottering about at their ease on the kilometre of closed roading that had become a new public space.

After eating he called Rachel.

‘I’m sorry I missed the cake.’

‘I’m taking half home for the weekend. I might share it with my father.’

‘Exactly how much do you love cake?’

‘Well, my dreams are cake dreams.’

‘That’s better than pipe dreams I suppose.’

She laughed. He did love her laughter.

‘Listen, Rachel, could we meet tomorrow?’

‘Why? You want to take me to a mall?’

‘Yes, for a movie.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Admiralty. You?’

‘MTR on my way home.’

‘We could watch a silly local movie. Do you know any new ones?’

‘I thought Rundleson and the others had Westernised you.’

‘I guess not. I miss the slang, the kung fu, the jokes. I’m just a Hong Kong dogs-body.’

‘So we’re to date fifteen years after we stopped. What happened?’

‘I want to grow up. I want to be a man like Boyce, like Rundleson, like— Duncan. Yes, even like Duncan.’

‘You can be.’

‘But on Saturday afternoons I want to remain a sweatpants kid for a while.’

‘I’ve my bad habits too. I’ll introduce them to you again. By the way, my boss had a little chat with Ng today. He’s on your side—my boss I mean. Ng’s been told to delegate, to bring people in Operations up the ladder, not act as if nobody exists but himself. Ng says he’s trying to change, if you believe that.’

‘I don’t, not one bit. Do you know what I think?’

‘What?’

‘Boyce is Chinese. I just realised it.’

Rachel laughed again and the sound was equally warm and welcome.

‘You know, you’re not childish, Rex. The one who is really childish is Ng. You see men like him all over Asia, running police forces, running governments. They are the really terrifying big children.’

Rex travelled to Mongkok. Under bright lights at the junction barricades were laid out and the pavements were thick with people. Television cameras were there, and a cordon of policeman. Moving towards the loudest shouting, Rex found a tug-of-war going on over a Mills Barrier. On one side were taxi-drivers, hauliers, bailiffs and triads, on the other, students, unemployed people, low-paid workers, sympathetic outsiders. The police were trying to keep the two sides apart. Rex threw himself on the side of the students and started pulling.